

Ariel's Grove



J. Z. Colby

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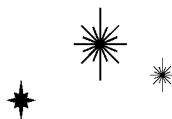
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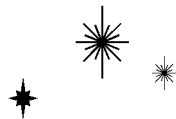
**Standing on Your Own Two Feet:
Young Adults Surviving 2012 and Beyond**



Ariel's Grove

a young-adult journey of
physical, emotional, and spiritual discovery

by
J. Z. Colby





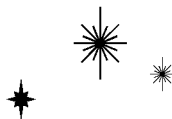
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ARIEL1EA23: Adobe Portable Document Format (PDF),
8.25" x 11" (printable on letter or A4 paper),
311 total pages, medium print (12-point Georgia type)

This special PDF edition has no ISBN.

This story only existed as a single typed manuscript from 1986 until 2023, when it was lovingly prepared and polished.

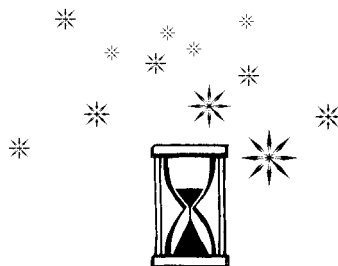


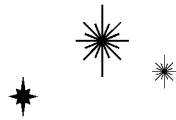


This story is based on real people and events that the author became familiar with while living in the interesting little city of Olympia, Washington during the 1970s and 1980s. All the names and identifying details have been changed, of course.

“Ariel” and her friends followed a religious path that is today very rare. This gives the reader the possibility of feeling discomfort, perhaps even hatred. It is also an opportunity for the reader to see past the details and glimpse the essential goodness and beauty in any person’s spiritual experience.

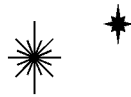
“Ariel” only got lost on one dead-end path during her youth. The author wishes his own youth had been so uneventful, and that he had had friends like she had.





“It is not the mental immaturity of the child that I commend to you but rather the *spiritual simplicity* of such an easy-believing and fully-trusting little one.”

— Jesus, Urantia Book 155:6:12



Chapter 1

I was wandering through the wooded park on my way home from town like I often did. Since my 10th birthday last week, I had been in a very thoughtful mood. I sat on the cliff that overlooked the water and remembered my Teacher. I hadn't thought about him for a long time. He had gone away — been sent away — two years before. None of the adults could handle the fact that we really *learned* things from him, important things. He wasn't like the teachers at school who just taught us the simple stuff — or more often just pretended to. He was our Teacher. All the kids loved him, a kind of love that we never felt for the plain old school teachers. I loved him especially, but my mom and dad thought it was some romantic thing — they couldn't understand that I could love someone as a Teacher.

The tide was low and I could see the sand bar part way across the inlet. We had come here many times with our Teacher. I looked down at the beach where he taught us to run and climb, to be free and to be strong. I remembered the rope swing he put up that swung out over the water at high tide, and how each of us had learned to fly. I think I was the first one on it, after him, but even little five-year-old Penelope had gone, in his arms the first time.

I never saw Penny anymore. She lived way out in the country. In fact, I never saw any of the others anymore. I was the only one who lived on this end of town, and all the rest went to different schools.

A gull screamed at me. Feeling finished with my thoughts, I hopped up,

trotted over to the playground area, and swung across the high rings a couple of times.

"How do you *do* that?"

I look down. It was some boy, 11 or 12, who had wandered over from a family having a picnic. I swung to the last ring and dismounted.

"I had a good Teacher," I said, rubbing my hands together. Then a thought came to me. "You want to learn?"

"Yeah, but . . . yeah!"

"Okay," I said, "you don't have to be a musclemán or a supergirl. See?" I pointed to my skinny arms. Actually, my arms had grown very strong over the last two years, but they still looked skinny.

"Well, how do you do it then?"

"You control the energy you have already. Have you ever gone bowling?"

"Yeah," he said with a puzzled look on his face.

"Okay, you know you don't just stand there and *oompf!* push the ball down the alley, right? You swing the ball back, right? And then you just *control* the energy of that ball as gravity pulls it back down. See what I mean?"

"I think so. You kind of use the motion that's already happening, like?"

"Yeah. Think of pushing someone on a swing. You push them when they are the farthest back, when they're just starting to go forward. You work with the energy. If you try to push them at some other time, you either get your head knocked in or fall flat on your face, right?"

"Okay, I copy," he said, grinning.

All of a sudden, everything I had been saying came into clear focus in my mind. I could almost hear my Teacher saying it, but I don't think he ever had, in just those words. "If you work with the universe, you get power. If you work against it, you get hurt!"

The boy laughed.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Michael. Yours?"

"Ariel. Now watch!" I grabbed the first ring, lower than the rest. "Swing . . . grab the next ring . . . swing back and *pull* back and release . . . swing and grab the next ring . . . pull back and release . . . see? . . . change direction . . . rings are swinging now . . . grab, pull back, release . . . if a ring isn't there,

change direction again . . . until you find one . . . pull back . . . last ring . . . swing . . . and at the end of your swing, bend your knees and drop.”

“You make it look so easy,” he said. “I’ve goofed around on them, but could never get my hand to the next ring.”

“That’s because you weren’t in motion. It doesn’t work standing still, only flying. And you *always* have a hand free so you *never* put two hands on a ring at once. Never! Are you ready to fly?”

“I guess so . . .”

“Feel the first ring, Michael. It’s cold steel and will hurt your hands at first, but they’ll get stronger.”

“It is cold!”

“Just swing on it a couple of times, back and forth, with one hand.”

“Ouch!”

“You can do it. After you are flying, you won’t notice the pain. A little pain is okay, you know. My Teacher taught me that.”

“What kind of teacher would teach you something like that?”

I didn’t answer him. A very special kind of Teacher. “Are you ready? I’ll help you swing, you just worry about your hands,” I said, getting a fallen branch to stop the rings. Even my Teacher couldn’t reach some of them. Am I a Teacher now?

“Okay,” he said.

“Swing! Swing again! Grab! Pull back and release! Grab! Can you feel the rhythm? Release, swing, grab! You’re doing it, Michael!”

“I am!”

“Last ring, swing out, bend your knees, and drop! Great!” I said and clapped. I was as happy for myself, that I could teach him, as I was for him.

“I did it! Ow! My hands are on fire!”

“They’ll be okay,” I said.

“You’re a good teacher, Ariel.”

I held in a smile. “Want to do it without me pushing?”

“M . . . maybe.”

“Just remember, on the pull-back, milk it for all it’s worth — it’s a long way to the next ring!”

“Hey, Michael!” a lady’s voice called.

“That’s my big sister. Gotta go. See ya!”

“Bye.” I watched him run across the grass. He was cute. I hoped he would practice.

Once he was out of sight, I walked on home.



Chapter 2

As we learn about ancient lands and peoples, we will often hear them described as “primitive.” Remember that the only way we know that is because their machines were much simpler than the machines we use today. In all other parts of their civilization, like art, government, social customs, and religion, we will often find that what they had was not all that much different from what we have today.

Somehow, that first history lesson touched me. I could almost feel like those ancient Hebrews, Greeks, Romans, and Celts were still alive, and that they were calling out to me.

Religion, myth, and magic were mixed right in with the lives of the people. We can't separate the history of the people from their gods, goddesses, and heroes . . .

From then on, whenever I wasn't concentrating on something else, I found myself pondering the ancients. In my mind, I could just change clothes and stroll into the agora in Athens, buy a roll and piece of fruit to munch on, and sit on a stone wall to watch some actors practice a play. A line of soldiers would run by in the street below, off to some battle in Peloponnese.

“Nióti!” a merchant called to me. “Make some use of yourself! Take this sack of loaves and dried fish to the Lykion, and I'll give you a copper.”

“Ne, kirie!” I said with a grin, pocketed the copper (which would buy me dinner), shouldered the sack, and trotted down the narrow street.

“And don’t eat any of it or I’ll have you whipped!” he yelled after me.

I smiled to myself, turned a corner and sat down to figure out the merchant’s knot that tied the sack closed. As soon as I had it memorized, I pocketed a loaf and a couple of fish, retied it with the same knot, and headed off.

Past the temple of Apollos Lykios I skipped, where several people were gathered. My favorite gods were Artemis and Athena, the Huntress and Wisdom, so I didn’t even stop. Soon I came to the Lykion where Aristotle taught.

I went through the stone portico and looked around. A boy just a little older than me took the sack and smiled at me.

Then I recognized him. It was Michael, the boy at the rings three weeks ago. I shook myself back to the present, put away the book I had been daydreaming on, and started poking around in the library shelves again. Athens was nice, but a little too hot for me.

I finally checked out *The Ancient Celts* and headed home.



For centuries it was believed the Celts built the mysterious structures at Stonehenge. It was finally determined that, even though the Druids may have used it, Stonehenge was built long before the Celts entered Britain in about 500 B.C.

I gazed at the pictures of the stone columns. In my mind I could see hooded figures filing in with a pre-dawn glow in the foggy sky. They carried torches and chanted in an ancient tongue. As the sun rose, all of them bowed down, except the Arch-Druid, who raised his arms and cried aloud in an eerie wail that made my heart pound. I focused on the page again.

The Druids, consisting of priests, prophets, and bards, were also the judges of the Celtic people. They gathered most often in oak groves, and held several trees in great reverence, as well as the mistletoe. Knowledge of plants and herbs, and their uses in magic and medicine, seems to have been

great.

I could see a full moon gleaming in the sky above a forest of large trees. Below the trees, figures in deep blue robes danced and sang in a circle, and in the middle, a single figure knelt at an altar preparing something. The chanting and dancing continued, and owls hooted in the trees. Finally, the figure at the altar stood and let its cloak fall to the ground. It looked like a girl, about my age, and she was completely naked, even barefoot. She held a garland, a circlet made of herbs and flowers. She raised it up and called out, "Ariel!"

I slammed the book and looked around my bedroom. It was late, so I curled up in bed and tried not to think about Druids anymore.



Chapter 3

I didn't have anyone to share all my reading and daydreaming with. I knew from experience that my parents didn't like anything unusual. There was a girl in my ballet class that I thought might be that kind of a friend, but when I tried once, she just said, "That's too weird!" and went back to stretching.

I had friends, but I was getting lonely anyway. I wanted someone I could tell things to, and trust. I could trust Tara, my horse, and often I told her about what I was reading and thinking as we threaded through the back roads and wooded trails. I thought of Michael one day, and wondered if I could share things with him, but I never saw him again. I even went by the wooded park two or three times a week to see if I could find him, but I never did.

It was a warm October, and one Saturday I decided to take some of my birthday money and treat myself to something. I didn't know what yet.

I bought myself a hot dog, then poked around in shops. I had quit getting dolls years ago, and even the glass and plastic horses didn't thrill me like they once did.

I looked at clothes, but decided my closet was in good enough shape. I went into the bookstore and looked at horse books a little. I had some of them, and the rest weren't interesting.

I was wandering around the store when I almost bumped into a shelf with a sign that said *Silk Covered Blank Books*. But there was only one book left, and it was on sale, \$8 instead of \$12. I felt the silk and thumbed through the

thick, textured blank pages.

"Do you like that one?" the lady asked.

"I think so . . ."

"It's strange, but that was the only one with that design on the cover, and no one wanted it."

I looked at the dark blue silk with funny lines on it. "It almost looks like words or something."

"I don't know," she said.

"I like it!" I said. I had this tingly feeling inside me that I had found something special. Maybe this little book was the friend I had been looking for. I was excited.

I bought it and dashed to the boardwalk near the docks where I liked to sit. I wanted to write my name in my new book, to make it really mine. But when I pulled a pen out of my purse, I couldn't do it. Something stopped me. I looked at the beautiful book, open to the first page, and I looked at my 19¢ medium-point plastic pen. It was wrong, it was the wrong pen. I couldn't. I started getting this strange feeling, like my book was alive or something, trying to tell me that I couldn't use my pen.

Whereas today we only attribute spiritual qualities to people, the ancients lived in a world of magic where everything, plant, animal, or object, possessed a spirit and spiritual qualities.

I had just read that the day before. I could never tell this to anyone but Tara. What should I do? I closed the book and gazed at the strange letters, or whatever they were, on the deep blue silk cover. I cleaned out a side pocket in my shoulder purse and put it lovingly in there — a place of its own.

I wandered down the street. I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I wasn't scared, just a little in awe. I wanted to write in the book . . . but it looked like maybe I wasn't ready yet.

I decided I was done in town, so I headed home at a brisk pace, but just as I was passing the art supply store, something caught my eye. I looked in the window — there it was, a calligraphy set, with three little bottles of ink, several pen nibs, and a stylus handle, all in a wooden box. I went inside and looked at

it closer. Black India ink, and green and red inks too. The stylus was wood and cork. An instruction book. It was beautiful, but it was \$15.

My heart was pounding. I pulled out my new book and said, “Well, little book, what do you think? Would these be okay?” I was hoping no one could hear me.

I had a vision of writing in my book with the calligraphy pens . . . beautiful letters in black ink . . . slowing forming each letter, thinking about each word. I knew in my heart that it would be right for my book.

Even though it put a large dent in my birthday money, I bought the set, and also a pad of paper that had the same texture as the pages of the book. I would need to practice!



Chapter 4

I quit reading Celtic books and started calligraphy. The instruction book told me how to clean the pens and stuff, and I began practicing the letters that looked old-fashioned but weren't too complicated. It wasn't easy, but I could do it.

I looked at books in the library on calligraphy, and discovered that there were lots of different letterings I could use. One book had color pictures of beautiful old books and scrolls. The borders and some of the letters were illuminated with wonderful knotwork, mythical creatures, and strange symbols, all in bright colors.

My pen box and pad went with me to school each day, and I would practice even while eating lunch with my friends.

"Hey, Ariel. Can you come to my Halloween party?" Nancy asked.

I looked up from my lettering. "That would be neat. What are you gonna do?"

"Play games and stuff. It's a potluck, and everybody is supposed to bring something to eat. Can you come?"

"I think so. I kind of want to do something, you know, Halloweenish, like go trick-or-treating of something."

"Nobody does that anymore! Except a few little kids that get driven around by their moms. And no one's allowed to do it after dark anymore, so it's no fun."

"I know! What time is your party?"

“Six. Will you come?”

“Sure.”

I was the kind of kid that everyone seemed to like no matter what I did. I didn't have to work at having friends. I knew some kids who were always trying to make friends, but never seemed to have any. It didn't seem quite fair.

I always liked trick-or-treating, especially in the dark. But these days, for two weeks before Halloween, every five minutes on the radio and TV there was some safety council telling people not to go out after dark, only go to people you know, get your candy x-rayed, and everything. Most kids I knew didn't even try anymore, like Nancy.

I decided I was going, when it was good and dark, about 7:00, alone probably, and then I could bring my candy to the party to share. And I was going to make a new costume — a deep blue hooded cloak like the girl in the oak woods in my daydream.

“I know what I'm bringing, Nancy, but it will be a surprise, and I might come a little late, okay?”

“It goes until 10:00. If you can't help me set-up, would you help me clean-up after, since you live just down the road?”

“Yeah, that would be fun,” I agreed.

“What are you going to wear?” Anna asked me.

“Something new. Secret! I haven't made it yet. You'll see!”



A couple of days later, I took the city bus to the mall after school and went in the yardage store. Blue. A rich, deep blue. I looked at patterns first, and found a good one. It told me I would need four yards of material, so I started looking around. I just wanted the outside — I could line it later if I wanted to.

The most perfect color was the velour, but it would cost me a fortune. I finally found some thick cotton in a good color. That would be better. I didn't want to look flashy.

When I got home, Mom noticed me with all the sewing stuff out.

“Hi, Honey. Have you done your homework?”

“You know I always do my homework, Mom.”

“What are you making?”

"I didn't use any of your fabric."

"That's not what I asked."

"Yeah, but that's what you wanted to know. I bought it with my birthday money. It's just a Halloween costume." I went back to pinning on the pattern.

"I guess I was a little worried about my fabrics. I just wish you and me could talk more, Honey."

"I can't think of anything to talk about," at least that you would approve of.

"Dinner is in half an hour."

"Thanks, Mom. I'll set the table and do the dishes."

As I cut out the pieces of my cloak, I thought about how much I would *love* to be able to talk to my mom about things that were important to me. But I couldn't even say what time it was without some little judgment or worry in her voice. I got all A's and B's in school, and she *still* didn't trust me to do my homework.

That's okay. I only knew one girl who could really talk to her parents. It's just the way the world is, I guess.

I got it all cut out that night, but I didn't get a chance to sew it together until Saturday. Mom helped me with some of the hard places.

"What exactly is it, anyway?" she asked.

"The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come," I said so I wouldn't have to explain too much.

After we hemmed up the bottom and sleeves, it fit well. I had sized it to go over plenty of clothes so I'd stay warm. I kept the hood nice and deep so my face would be in shadows. My mom said the color was too dark and cars would hit me. I didn't plan to step into the path of any cars, but I kept that fact to myself.

That night after dinner, I made a green belt from a remnant, and dug into my jewelry box. Standing in front of my mirror with my cloak on, I tried on different things until my string of clay beads with a crude brass medallion looked good. I think it looked right because it looked ancient.



I practiced calligraphy all that week in my spare time. After dinner on Halloween, I put on my costume, cleaned off my desk, and got out two tall

candles in holders. By only the glow of the flames, I dipped my pen into the black ink and slowly lettered:

Ariel's Book

When I was sure it was dry, I changed to a finer pen nib, turned several pages, and wrote:

**If you work with the universe, you get power.
If you work against it, you get hurt !**

When that had dried, I closed the book and blew out the candles, grabbed my trick-or-treat bag and headed out into the darkness.

Being out in the dark alone didn't bother me. I had gotten used to doing important things alone. I had almost always had to, except when my Teacher was around.

I lurked through the neighborhood, going anywhere I wanted — I even cut through some dark yards and fields. I felt powerful. In my blue cloak I was working with the night, working with the darkness. If any egg-throwers had come by, they would never have seen me. I was the spook! I considered all the mischief I could do, but I knew that hurting people and their things wasn't for me.

I think I was just about invisible in my hooded cloak, and I scared a couple of people who were out checking the candles in their pumpkins. My bag filled fast, I think because it was late and people wanted to get rid of their extra candy. Satisfied, I headed for Nancy's.

I rang the doorbell, and a whole group of kids opened the door. But they were looking at me strangely.

"Who's that?"

"Are you trick-or-treating?"

"Are you a spook?"

Then I remembered that my face was deep in the shadow of my hood, and

none of them had seen my new costume. I reached up and pulled my hood back.

“Ariel!”

“We missed you!”

“Come on in!”

I had plenty of candy for everyone, and I ate lots of their potato chips and stuff. Some of the kids were surprised I had gone trick-or-treating alone. The ones that knew me rolled their eyes, but weren't surprised.



Chapter 5

We can identify three kinds of what might be called Witchcraft. Beginning in prehistoric times, the tribal medicine man attempted to bring some understanding to a largely unexplained universe, and to provide some relief for the afflictions of his people. Later, Egyptian priests, Babylonian astrologers, Greek oracles, and Celtic Druids are an extension of this category. Ethical and moral standards varied widely . . .

I was starting to see how magic and witchy people were very, very old. And it sounded like they were very important once — they were the first priests, scientists, and doctors. Hmm.

The second meaning of the term is uniquely medieval, coming out of the infamous Witch Trials in Europe and New England. It is not known exactly what, if any, of the charges made were based on fact, but the evidence suggests that the vast majority of the persons charged were the victims of prejudice and revenge motives, and most of the charges were the fantasies of the accusers. Unfortunately, our modern popular concept of witchcraft is derived almost entirely from these events . . .

So what people think of as witches may not have even existed! All those dumb little kid's books about black witches in pointy hats riding brooms! Doesn't anyone care about what's really true anymore?

Lastly, with the repeal of anti-witchcraft laws, the late 20th century has seen a revival of ancient pagan cults of many kinds. For the most part, these modern groups are white Witches, non-sacrificial Druids, etc., embracing high moral standards, beneficent motives, and only legal uses of herbs and drugs. Most such cults are eclectic, developing their own composite philosophy and practice by selecting elements of several ancient traditions, or just inventing their own . . .

I read that paragraph over several times, and looked up a couple of words. I was starting to put together a picture in my mind of something . . . but it wasn't complete yet. I was starting to wonder if I wasn't really one of the ancients somehow. It sure would explain some of the ways I was different from my friends.

My reading had gone far beyond the 5th grade history book, but I kept up with all the regular schoolwork too. Thanksgiving came and went. We piled a table with food, ate some of it, then worked on the leftovers for days. A couple of shriveled relatives came over to help us eat. It didn't seem very special to me.

I'm not sure exactly why, but as Advent began, I started to go to church again. My parents didn't go anymore, and I didn't make a big deal of it. I just started going. Somehow it seemed to be a part of the picture I was trying to put together.

My calligraphy was getting better all the time. My mom found me practicing once, and was kind of amazed. She gave me that funny sideways look I always got when I did something that most girls my age didn't do. Oh, well.

One day I opened my special blank book and added:

Be as gentle as doves, yet wise as foxes.

That saying seemed important to me. I decided I wanted to put a title on the page. Laws? Rules? I couldn't decide. I opened my pad and practiced a little with the fine chisel-point. Wisdom? I looked it up.

1. *The quality of being wise; the faculty of making the best use of knowledge, experience, understanding, etc.; good judgment; sagacity.* 2. *Learning; erudition; knowledge; as, the wisdom of the ages.*

That's the one I wanted. I put a wide chisel-point nib in my stylus and carefully formed the letters on the top of the page. I read the definition again, and thought of the doves and the foxes.

I found a book on wizards and magicians and read about them. Some of the things it said about them I liked, some I didn't, and some gave me the feeling that the author was just making stuff up.

My mom and dad figured out I was going to church, but they didn't bug me about it. As Christmas approached, I invited them to go to Midnight Mass with me, and they accepted. I told them I wanted to walk, and they weren't too sure about that at first, mumbling stuff about being safe and slipping on the ice. But they finally decided it would be okay since we would all be together, and we could all wear boots and it would be so cold that no one would care.

I think the hardest thing for them was that *I* had invited *them* — they hadn't made me go or anything. I was growing up, faster than my friends, and I had been doing it ever since that year with my Teacher. My mom and dad would always hate him a little for that. They couldn't understand that he hadn't changed me, he had just helped to wake things up that were already inside me.



Chapter 6

Christmas eve was clear and cold and magical. There was a good feeling in our house — I think my parents were realizing that they were getting back in touch with me. But it was different from when I was younger. I didn't do things just to make them happy anymore. I had things that were important to me, and I only talked to Mom and Dad about something if I really felt I could. I guess I was sort of a 10-year-old teenager.

I lit my candles, dipped my pen, and lettered:

**In order to enter the kingdom of heaven,
you must become as a little child.**

I had learned from my reading about the ancients that all the holidays used to start in the evening of the day before, and continue all the next day. I was glad some of them, like Christmas, still did.

At 11:00 we got our coats and boots on and headed out into the cold. Mom was a little freaked at first that I was purposefully sliding on the icy spots, but then she realized that I was doing better sliding than they were doing trying not to.

"You know," I said, "if Joseph and Mary traveled for three days to get from Nazareth to Bethlehem, it seems like it should be easy for us to walk a mile to church."

My parents loosened up after that and we laughed and talked the rest of

the way.

“Dear, do you know that Ariel has taught herself calligraphy, and has made her own Christmas cards?” Mom said to Dad.

“That’s wonderful, Honey. Isn’t that almost a lost art?” Dad asked me.

“Sort of,” I said. “Not too many people like to do things slowly and carefully anymore.”

When we arrived, the choir was singing. We got candles, lit them at the big candle, and walked into the dark church, about half full of people holding glowing candles, their faces orange in the flamelight. We added our wrapped gifts to the growing pile along the sanctuary rail and found seats a few rows back.

By midnight, the place was packed. We all sang *Silent Night* as the priests and altar servers came up the aisle, and when the priest blew out his candle, we all did. A huge cloud of smoke rose slowly toward the ceiling and some of the lights came on. They must have switched off the smoke detectors for a while.

The usual readings were replaced by the Christmas play. There was a little wooden table in the aisle not far from where we were sitting, and Mary appeared and started working at it. They even got her age right — she was a girl I kind of knew, who was about 14. A priest in his fanciest robes played Gabriel and told her about her future son. I could tell they had really practiced — they had all the lines memorized and didn’t stumble much.

Mary visited Elizabeth, and Caesar Augustus announced the census. Then Joseph and Mary, complete with pillow under her clothes, journeyed around the outer aisles of the church toward Bethlehem. They talked as they walked, and while everyone turned to watch and listen, the altar servers set up the stable at the front of the church.

Joseph argued with the innkeeper, and they finally went to the stable. Older women gathered, the lights dimmed out, and Mary went through about a 30-second labor. A baby started crying — they must have had it waiting in the altar servers’ room.

Shepherds came in from all directions carrying lanterns and candles, gathered around the little family, and Mary could be seen cuddling the crying baby. The choir started *Alleluia*, and everyone sang as the lights came on.

The baby, not getting changed or nursed, kept crying.

As Joseph and Mary walked down the center aisle, carrying the baby and talking between them, the priests began to prepare the Eucharist. I had never looked that closely before, but now my eyes were glued to their every action — washing their hands, pouring the wine and holy oil, breaking the bread. It was a magical ceremony! I knew that magic and religion were cousins, but now I realized just how close they really were. I watched the priest's hand motions, listened to their invocations and prayers. It was beautiful!

I lined up to share the broken bread and cup of wine — real bread, not the usual wafers. It was more special than before because I knew more about it. I still felt close to God, but I also felt a connection with some simple people thousands of years ago who met in caves or groves and struggled to worship and to understand. When I took that bit of bread in my mouth, it was the bread eaten around the Beltane fires on May eve for centuries past. That sip of wine was from the temple of the Delphic Oracle in Greece. I sat back down with my parents and closed my eyes, feeling a little overwhelmed.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, the mass was ended. The priest announced that there were Yule cakes and egg nog, both alcoholic and non-alcoholic, in the Parish Hall. Mom and Dad were smiling and happy, and we went over to get some.

We found a place to sit. Dad looked me right in the eyes and said, "You're a grown-up girl now, aren't you?"

"Yes, Dad," I said.

Mom and I held hands, which was kind of new for us, and Dad brought back three Yule cakes and three cups of egg nog, all the same kind.



Chapter 7

When I got back to school after New Years, I had a surprise. There on the playground was the same lanky, freckled girl I had known two years before.

“Penny!” I yelled.

She looked toward me. “Ariel!”

I ran up to her. “What are you doing here? Are you staying?”

“Yeah. We just moved into town.”

“You must be in the 3rd grade now!” I said. “That’s where I was just after our Teacher left.”

“You remember him too?” she asked.

“I didn’t much until last summer. I was so hurt and angry about what happened to our class that I just hid my feelings from everybody. But I’m starting to do things and learn things again.” I told her about the rings and stuff I did at the park.

“Wow!” she said. “That sounds neat. Do you think maybe you and me could do things together?”

“Sure! Would you really like to?”

“I sure would! You were his best student, and if I could learn things from you, it would be great!”

At lunch time, I talked to the friends I always ate lunch with, Nancy and everybody. I told them I had a special friend I wanted to eat with, but she was in the 3rd grade. At our school, anyone could sit anywhere during lunch, but most kids sat with their friends in the same grade. I had learned well that age

didn't matter — it was who you were that counted. I remembered Penny at five doing things a 10-year-old boy wouldn't do. As Nancy and Anna and everybody looked at each other, I decided for sure that I was going to be Penny's friend and sit with her, no matter what.

I looked at my friends. They all had scowls on their faces. I was mad. I was getting hot and sweaty. I could feel my courage building.

"Okay you guys, I really like you all." I was starting to cry. "But with Penny I've been through rain and cold and mud. I thought I was going to die once, and she was there for me. There's no way I could *not* be her friend!" I grabbed my tray and went over to the 3rd grade table.



After that, Penny and I were inseparable. I had lost five friends and gained one, and I was ahead. For weeks and weeks we played together and talked at lunch about all the things we had done three years before with our Teacher.

About the end of February, I started sharing with her some of the stranger stuff I was doing. I told her about calligraphy. I hadn't done much since Christmas, but it only took me an hour of practice to get going again.

"I could teach you, but it takes a lot of practice, and if you really wanted to get good, you would have to get your own pens and ink."

"I don't think my mom would let me right now," Penny said, looking sad.

"Yeah. Well, you can always use mine at school, and at my house."

Penny brightened. "I'd like to learn it."

I put my arm around her. "I'll help you learn it as much as you want."

She smiled at me. "Thanks, Ariel."

Little by little, I started telling Penny about the Druids, and magic, and witches, and other things I was learning about. I made her promise to keep it all secret. She listened to me wide-eyed during recess when no one else could hear us. We didn't talk about secret things at lunch — too many other ears at the same table. I still sat with her at the 3rd grade table, or we would both sit at the outcasts table, which didn't bother us.

I wasn't in any of the 5th grade circles of friends anymore. I didn't want to be. I was having too much fun with Penny. She was more like me than any of my old friends. And I even found that some of the outcasts and loners were more fun to talk to than super-popular Nancy.

Not too long after that, I showed Penny my book. I had started a new page with special words on it, and what they meant.

Druid - Celtic priests, prophets, and bards
wisdom - making the best use of knowledge and experience
Artemis - goddess of the hunt
Athena - goddess of wisdom
Beltane - May eve, bonfires, blessing of fields and cattle
magic circle - 9 foot circle for rituals
moral - what God would want us to do, the right thing
Grimoire - book of magic spells and other secret things

"This stuff is neat, Ariel! Could I learn it too? Could I be your helper, maybe? If you're going to be a magician, you'll need an assistant, won't you?"

We were on top of the monkey bars. I looked at my eight-year-old friend. "Only if we make a pact," I said.

"What kind of a pact?"

"First, to secrecy. Both of us have to keep secret what we learn and do. A lot of people don't like magic stuff."

"I know!" Penny said. "My mom would die. But I'm good at keeping secrets."

"And also a pact of honesty. If I ever say something and you think it is wrong, you'll tell me. Okay?"

"Okay. Even though you're the teacher?"

"Even!" I said. "Remember, our Teacher could say things like *I was wrong about that*. I never hear other grown-ups say those words."

Penny nodded with wide eyes.

"And if we ever quit being friends, you won't tell anyone I taught you this stuff."

"Okay. How do we make a pact?"

I thought for a minute. "I'll write the pact in my book, and Saturday when you came over, we'll both sign it, using our own blood!"



Chapter 8

We promise to keep all the things we learn in our Grove secret from people who aren't in the Grove. If we ever leave the Grove, we promise to keep the Grove and the people in it secret. If we ever hear anything said, or see anything done in the Grove that isn't right, we promise to tell the others.

I read it out loud.

"Why *grove*?" Penny asked.

"The Druids met in groves, and we have lots of trees here. Also because *coven* is one of those words that scare people."

Penny nodded. "Like *witch*." She read it to herself slowly, then smiled.

I lit candles and got out my pens. A fine nib would be best, I decided, so we wouldn't have to squirt out *too* much blood. "You are my witness, and God too," I said. With a pin, I pricked my finger and let a drop of blood fall right into the pen nib. I grabbed a tissue to stop the bleeding, and tried the pen on my practice pad. It worked! I wrote my name below the pact.

"Wow," Penny said. "My turn."

"I'll wash and dry the pen first. You can sit at the desk now."

When the pen was ready, she said, "You are my witness, and God too." She pricked her finger, filled the pen, and I handed her a tissue. She wrote her name under mine. It was done.

I cleaned the pen and got out Band-aids. We looked at each other and

smiled.

“Did you bring some money for lunch?” I asked.

“Yep!”

“Let’s go!”

It was March and we were having a warm spell. There was no ice or snow on the sidewalks, so when we got to a certain tree, I said, “It’s exactly one mile to the middle of town. Shall we run? Not to race — we stay together.”

“Sure!”

We started. “Let’s try to keep running, no matter how slow we have to go, okay?” I asked.

“We’ve done this before, haven’t we?” Penny said.

“Yeah. Three years ago.”

We ran. My side started to ache. Penny slowed down. My guts hurt more. I wanted to stop. We were about a third of the way. I looked at my friend. She looked at me. I had to slow down some more. Penny looked like she really wanted to stop. I kept going. My side was getting a little better. Not too far now. Penny looked at me with tears in her eyes. We didn’t say anything. We kept going. We were almost there. I almost stumbled and Penny slowed down for me. Only a little more! We made it!

“Walk!” I gasped. We moaned and laughed as we wobbled down the street.

When we had our breath back, Penny asked, “What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know. If we both have \$3, we could eat at the Chinese place.”

“I only have \$2.50,” she said.

“I’ll give you the 50¢. You want to? It’s all-you-can-eat!”

“Okay!”

“I want to look in some of the junk and antique shops,” I said.

“I want to look at sweaters. My mom said if I found one I liked, and it wasn’t too much, she’d get it for me.”

We wandered through clothing shops, and Penny looked at sweaters. I wasn’t interested in clothes, so I just tagged along. Then we hit an antique store. I wasn’t sure exactly what I wanted to look at, just old stuff. Nothing caught my eye.

We feasted at the Chinese place. Egg rolls, fried rice, sweet and sour

chicken, veggies, soup, and Chinese tea. My fortune cookie said, *You have found a trustworthy companion.* I smiled to myself.

After lunch we went into a pawn shop. I looked around at old stereos and junk until a glass case caught my eye. It was full of all kinds of knives. I remembered something I had read.

Find a wooden-handled knife with a good steel blade for ceremony and gathering herbs. It may be used, but let it be new for you. Do not haggle on the price . . .

I looked around in the case. There was a wooden-handled one in a leather sheath. The clerk was coming over, a high-school guy. "Could I look at that one?" I asked.

"How old are you, anyway?"

"It's for cutting herbs and stuff," I said.

He let me look at it. It had a nice, slightly curved blade about five inches long. Stainless steel. I put it back in the sheath. You could hardly tell it was a knife because the handle was the same color as the sheath. "How much?" I asked the guy.

"That dopey little thing, \$10," he said.

"Will you sell it to me?"

"For cutting flowers? Okay. Don't tell anyone I sold it to you."

I looked him in the eye. "I won't." I paid him and popped the knife into my purse as we left.

"What's *that* for?" Penny asked.

"You'll see," I said.



Chapter 9

The White Magician is a seeker after wisdom who attempts to find the hidden treasures of truth. He traditionally calls upon God, angels, and elemental spirits to supply his power. He is the African Witch-Doctor, the village Cunning Man, the Psychic Healer. In most cultures he is believed to possess a special indwelling power or spirit, or a special connection with such a spirit. If he succumbs to the temptation to practice magic for selfish or immoral ends, his power will leave him . . .

I wonder if there is some kind of power or spirit in me? Maybe it's like the gifts of the Holy Spirit that the Bible talks about. Maybe white magic is my gift. But I can't use it for selfish things. I'm glad I put that honesty stuff in out Pact.

White Magicians always refuse to work for reward, except perhaps for the cost of materials used in an amulet or charm, as they realize that accepting payment would make them cater to the client's wishes, what she wanted to hear, instead of what she needed to know . . .

That sounds important. I only want to do magic that is real and true, and I don't want to make money doing it.



At school during recess, Penny and I started to test each other on the

traverse bars and stuff.

"Come on, Ariel! You're not *that* old yet! Faster! Swing, swing, swing, swing. Back, swing, swing, swing. Again! swing, swing, swing."

After six times back and forth, I finally fell off, dead tired. Penny hopped on, did eight trips, then died beside me in the sand.

"You're good at that!" I said. "And faster than me. I bet you'll be good in the trees!"

The next day we ran around the field together. The gardener had told me it was a third of a mile, so we went around three times. We started doing it about every other day, and we were getting stronger.

The other kids began to tease us. After running one day, Penny turned to me and said, "Why are we doing this, anyway? Everybody is starting to call us wierdos!"

"Because," I said, "to do magic you have to be strong and quick! And you have to not care what people think about you, because they will *always* think you're weird if you're different from them. Remember Jesus? They thought he was so weird they killed him. See what I mean?"

"Yeah," she said with wide eyes.

"Don't forget, they're probably jealous, too. You and me can run faster and farther than anyone else in our school."

"I never thought of that. Wow."

We walked off the playground together. Just before we had to go in different directions, I said, "Next Wednesday is Beltane. It was celebrated with bonfires. Can you come over, have dinner with us, and then we can make a campfire in the backyard, eat smores, and I'll teach you some stuff about magic?"

"I think so!" Penny said.

"Great! See you later!"



It was supposed to be a newly-kindled fire made from sacred oak wood. We had to settle for kitchen matches and alder sticks. I hoped the Spirit of Fire would understand.

"There are four elements in magic. Earth, air, fire, and water." I opened the marshmallows. "We have to become masters of each element. This

summer, I want to learn how to make fire without matches.”

Penny broke up a chocolate bar. “Would mastering water be like learning how to swim?”

“Yeah. Maybe other things in the water, too. Graham cracker, please.”

“What should we call ourselves?” Penny asked.

“I don’t know. White Magicians, maybe?” I put a marshmallow on my stick. “Remember, we only do good magic. I learned an ancient rule — whatever harm you do to someone with magic returns to you three times over.”

“Yuk! Are we going to have wands and stuff?”

“Maybe someday,” I said, “but I bet wands are hard to make. We have our book of magic, the one that we made our Pact in. It’s called a Grimoire, and they are always hand written. As we learn things that aren’t easy to remember, we can write them in the book. It’s your book now, too, so if you want to put something in it, you can.”

Penny looked thoughtful. “Let’s have a page for each of the elements, and then we can write things about them that we learn, like swimming for mastering water.”

“Sounds good.” I grabbed a chocolate square and built a smore. “If we can do good magic, our power comes from understanding nature and knowing God and the Spirits. If we don’t work with nature and God, we can’t do anything. You go to church, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but it’s pretty boring.”

“Mine can be too. But we need to learn all we can about God and learn to talk to Him,” I said.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yep. He’s in charge. If we can’t talk to him, we can’t do magic. My marshmallow’s on fire!” I blew it out and squished it between graham crackers.

“I guess I kind of believe in God,” Penny said, “but I don’t know why He’s supposed to be so boring!”

“He won’t be boring in *our* Grove! But magic will be harder than going to church. We have to become strong and wise.”

“More chocolate,” Penny requested.

“Here. And we have a magical knife. Or we will when it is blessed by each of the four Elemental Spirits. It’s called the Athame,” I said, pulling the knife from the pawn shop out of my coat pocket, “and tonight we will offer it to the first of them.”

I took the blade from its sheath, laid it on my lap, and said the words I had worked for days to memorize.

“I consecrate thee, O knife of steel, by the Spirit of Fire, that thou shall be potent in thy magical work, that thou shall always serve God, and that thou shall spill my blood instead if I ever attempt to harm another with thee.”

Then I slowly picked up the knife and waved it three times through the leaping flames of the fire.



Chapter 10

I always loved the pale green colors that were everywhere in the springtime. Penny and I had graduated to four times around the field, and we would dedicate each lap to one of the elements, usually saving Fire for the last lap to give us extra energy to finish.

The famous Olympic gymnast Nadia Comaneci was still on everyone's minds, and one day a teacher asked me if I wanted to take gymnastics lessons. It was tempting, but didn't feel quite right. I said no thank you. I had other plans. After school, I learned that Penny had received the same offer, and had also turned it down.

In early June, we finally realized that next year would be different.

"You're going to Middle School next year, aren't you?" Penny said. "I almost forgot we were in different grades. What are we going to do, Ariel?"

"We are going to be strong, Penny. We can meet after school most days, and spend Saturdays together, maybe Sundays too. And what about this summer? We're going to spend it together, aren't we?"

"I hope so! My mom usually enrolls me in the YMCA program," she said.

"I'll go home with you today and hopefully we can talk her into letting you spend summer with me. You can eat lunch at my house everyday, and we can run and climb in the woods and do all kinds of things!"

"That would be great! And we can learn to make fire without matches, and swim in the inlet," she changed to a whisper, "and learn more magic!"

"And next year," I said, "we should both make new friends. It will be good

for us, and we might find someone who can join the Grove! But we can't tell them anything about it until we know them and agree we can trust them, okay?"

"Yeah. We have to be careful!" Penny said.



It was easy to talk Penny's mom into letting her spend the summer with me by telling her about all the things we did together on the playground, and reminding her of how much money she would save. School finished, and the very next day we hit the park to do what we couldn't do at school — climb trees! We coached each other up the big maples near the beach. "Trust yourself and the tree, Penny. Pull up on that branch with your left hand. Now find a foothold. Yes! You made it!"

Penny was scared in the trees at first, but got better quickly. We both climbed a tree everyday. We wore pants so we wouldn't scrape up our legs, and I finally worked up the courage to do what I had wanted to do for a long time — shimmy up a straight alder. At first I had to pick just the right size, and I couldn't go up very far.

"You can do it, Ariel! The next foot of that trunk is exactly the same as the last foot!"

"Yeah, but I'm tired!" I said from 15 feet up.

"Are you going to let that stop you?"

"No!" I said and started climbing up the tree some more. "How high am I now?"

"About 20 feet!"

I looked down. Oh my God! I hugged the tree and started down.

We always got home dirty and tired, but my mom didn't care — she saw how strong and happy I was. Penny kept her play clothes at my house and changed back to nice clothes to go home. Sometimes her mom would let her stay for dinner and spend the night. It was then that we would light candles and write in our Grimoire.

While running that day, I had remembered something, and now I wrote:

**When doing physical things, let your body limit you,
not your mind.**

Not too long after school got out, Penny turned nine, and we started swimming twice a week, once at the YMCA pool, and once in the salt water of the inlet. We helped each other to swim and to float. Penny had trouble with water in her nose, but I told her to just leave it there and breathe through her mouth, and after a while she got used to it. We swam hard and got tired, but we were becoming stronger. A college girl at the pool gave us some lessons one day, and our swimming strokes improved. One, two, or three kicks per stroke, depending on the speed we wanted, and one, three, or five strokes per breath, always an odd number so we'd breathe on both sides.

When we swam in the inlet, we used a little bay where the water was cleaner than near the city, and where no boats went. Soon we were able to swim out to the channel buoy about half a mile out. At first we had to do some floating on the way back to conserve energy.

One day, when we got back to the beach, there was a high-school guy there. "Hi. You two are really good swimmers. Have you ever thought about going all the way across?"

"How far is it?" I asked, looking across the water.

"About four miles right here. If you ever want to try, I can get my dad's canoe and go along beside you. See you later! I live right up there."

We never tried it that summer, but it gave us something to think about.



We practiced running through the woods without any roads or trails to help us. It was hard since there were bushes and thorns just about everywhere. We learned to scamper along fallen logs, hop over low brush, and crawl under tall bushes. We came home more scratched and dirty than when we climbed trees.

"We need to start deciding on tests for ourselves and other people who might want to join the Grove," I said.

"We know some of it already, don't we?" Penny said. "Swimming to the buoy and back, climbing maples and alders, running two miles without stopping, running through the wild part of the park. What else?"

"We still need to learn to make fire. How about rope climbing and swinging?" I suggested.

"For sure! I think we have a good one in the garage I can use."

"Thick?"

"Almost an inch," Penny said.

"The rope test could be climbing up a good tree with the rope, tying it to the tree, coming down the rope, swinging, climbing back up the rope, and climbing back down the tree. Just like our Teacher did."

"Climbing up the rope will be the hardest!" Penny said.

She brought the rope the next day, and we started climbing with it and swinging.

A few weeks later, we were getting to the point where we could climb most trees almost effortlessly. If I wore a jacket to protect my arms, I could go as high up the alders as I wanted — 40 feet or more. It was eerie when they started to sway at the top, but I got used to it. Penny preferred the maples, but she made herself learn to climb the alders too.

In the maples, climbing down the rope was easy, and we were already experts at swinging, of course. Climbing up, as Penny predicted, was much harder. I raided the mountaineering section in the library, and we learned how we could use our feet to lock the rope and hold us in place to rest our arms. At first we could only go up a third or a half the way without resting.

Penny was the first one to make it all the way up without stopping. I clapped and cheered 40 feet below her. She rested in the tree awhile, then pulled up and coiled the rope. About a week later I made it all the way up without stopping.

"What if one of us gets hurt?" Penny asked one day.

"I guess the other person will have to help them, or get help," I said.

"I don't know much about that stuff."

"Me neither."



We were at the library a couple of days later to get books on fire making. I was checking the books out, and Penny was looking at the bulletin boards. "Look, Ariel!" She pointed to a poster about a wilderness first aid and rescue course at the college.

"That would be perfect!" I said.

"But it's \$50," Penny said, disappointed.

I was reading the fine print. "Wait! It says here that if you're auditing the course for non-credit, it's only \$10! We don't need college credit, do we? It's all day, four Saturdays in September. Do you think your mom would let you do it?"

"I'll find a way!"

It took some pleading, and my mom calling Penny's mom, but we did it. We took the bus to the college to get the forms, had our moms sign them, and were enrolled the next day.



It was just early August, so we started learning fire making. We went to the rock shop and got pieces of flint, then the welding shop for little pieces of steel. We got out the sewing machine and made pouches for both of us that would hold all our fire-making things.

Making sparks was easy. Getting those sparks to be flames was the hard part. We worked in the backyard at the fire pit, and after a couple of hours, I finally burned up a cotton ball.

We did it a little each day, and after a while we could both get a flame in just a minute or two. One evening we gathered twigs and sticks, Penny laid out the tinder she liked to use, and I invited my parents to watch. Penny's second spark caught. She blew on it until it came to life and we laid on little twigs. Soon a roaring fire was browning our marshmallows. That day was my 11th birthday, and we all went out for dinner afterwards.



Summer was nearing its end. A windy day made me remember the Athame, so I got it out and we went down to the beach. No one was around. I held the magical knife in the wind and said:

"I consecrate thee, O knife of steel, by the Spirit of Air, that thou shall be potent in thy magical work, that thou shall always serve God, and that thou shall break in twain before I may ever use thee to gain wealth."

We climbed to the highest hill in the park. I thrust the knife into the dirt and repeated the incantation for the Spirit of Earth, which ended, "... and that thou shall become dull and useless before I may ever use thee for evil

constructions.”

Last, we went to the little hidden spring we knew. I held the blade in the water and said the incantation to the Spirit of Water, which ended, “. . . *and that thou shall rust before I may ever use thee to turn the heart of any person to evil.*”

“Our Athame is ready for magical work,” I said. “Now we must prove ourselves worthy!”

We had two more days that we could be together before school started. The first of the two days I would be tested and Penny would be my assistant. That night, I lit candles and wrote in the Grimoire:

Ariel - first test for mastery of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water

Then I closed my eyes. “God and Spirits, I want to be strong. I want to pass my tests so I can do good magic. It will be hard doing it all in one day, but I want to. I’m so glad Penny is my friend.” I washed my pen and curled up in bed.



Chapter 11

Penny came over about 9:00 as we had planned. We looked at the tide tables and found that high tide, the best time to swim, would be in the afternoon. The day looked nice as we loaded Penny's bicycle with the big rope, a light rope for a puller, lunches, swimsuits, and towels. We had decided that the assistant would carry all the stuff.

I was in a strange mood — I didn't feel like saying much. I guess I was a little scared, but I wasn't sure of what. What am I doing? Who am I proving myself to? I couldn't think of anybody in the world who cared if I could climb trees or not. Except . . . my very best friend Penny . . . and myself.

I took a deep breath, looked up at the blue sky, and pedaled harder to catch up.

"Penny, did I ever tell you that you are my best friend, and the best friend I could *ever* imagine having?"

"Really?"

I didn't say anything, but we smiled at each other as we rode into the park.

"I shall test my mastery of the Air first!" I said, shouldering the big coil of rope. Penny stashed our bikes in the bushes and I headed along the cliff path. I was looking for a special tree, one I had never climbed before, but would make a good swing. I looked at several and finally stopped.

It hung way out over the beach, with smooth, strong limbs. Penny looked at me a little worried. "How are you going to get up the main trunk — it's so smooth and big!"

I looked around for a rock, found the one I wanted, and tied the end of our light puller rope to it. I aimed for the first fork in the branches and tossed the rock. On the third try, the rope went over the branch, just where I wanted. I used the light rope to pull up the big rope, then held both sides of the big rope as I climbed. I think our Teacher had done something similar once.

"Can I breathe now?" Penny asked from below.

I sat on the branch and looked down at my friend. I hadn't come far from where she was standing, but now there was a 30 foot drop below me. "When I get through these tests, I'm going to buy myself a banana split!"

"I'll buy, and after tomorrow, you can buy me one!" Penny said.

"Agreed." I coiled the rope I had just climbed, then looked up to where I wanted to hang the swing. One part was so steep I almost had to shimmy. When I got to the right place, the branches were starting to bend a little under my weight. I fed the rope down between the branches. When it looked long enough, I started it swinging so Penny could grab it.

"Got it! Give me another 2 feet. Perfect!"

I tied a good strong knot. When Penny finished making a loop on the end, she let it go. I slid down, rope between my feet, hands controlling my descent. I stopped at the loop and tied on the little puller rope. I lowered myself down until I was hanging by my hands from the loop, then dropped to the ground.

When I got to the top of the cliff trailing the puller rope, Penny was bouncing up and down. We checked to see where the swing would take us.

"This would be the perfect place to take off from, but we could get speared on that dead branch over there," I said.

Penny frowned and nodded, then crept around to the other side of the tree. "This looks good. You might hit those leaves and twigs.

"That's better than getting speared. I'll take it." I crawled along the cliff edge and looked. Yes, the ride would be nice. I pulled in the big rope, coiled the puller rope and tied it up, tested my knot in the tree, and took a deep breath. Foot in the loop, hands high on the rope . . .

I was flying! Down toward the beach, then up to green leaves. Smash! I broke through the veil of leaves and into the blue sky, beach and water below me. Then back down through the leaves toward the cliff, and up toward my laughing friend.

On the second swoop, I only touched the leaves instead of breaking through them. After that I played — hanging upside down from the rope, or swinging around and around, or just holding with my hands. The rope slowed, I dropped off and climbed back up the cliff.

“My turn!” Penny said.

“On the first swing, you break right through into the daylight!” I said.

“I saw you. Here goes!” She flew.

I sat on the cliff and watched. She was beautiful ... graceful. I remembered my own flight, especially bursting through and seeing the sky. I had used more than half the rope to make the swing — 60 feet I guessed.

When Penny got back up with the puller rope, we threw our arms around each other. “That’s the best swing I have ever ridden on!” she said. We looked at each other with big smiles on our faces. We had both worked really hard, and our reward was being able to fly.

“Well, on with the tests. I’m sure not going to climb up that puller, so I’ll just have to swing again!” I said with a cheesy grin.

“Oh, how sad!”

I untied the puller — I wouldn’t need it again — put in a foot and sailed into the air. “Whoopee!” I yelled as I burst through the leaves.

I began to climb even before the swing had stopped. I think it was a longer rope than I had ever climbed before. I rested about half way up, then again just before scampering onto the limb.

Up came the rope, and down I climbed. I just jumped down the last section of trunk where I had to use the rope on the way up.

“I learned recently that we should always thank the tree or plant we use,” I said and gave the trunk a big hug. Penny took the rope and we headed off to the alder grove.

I wandered deep into the grove, the trees getting taller and taller as I went.

“Jeez, Ariel, how tall are these?”

“About a hundred feet, I think.”

I looked around and Penny followed. I felt a little scared again. I wanted to go up a tall one. I knew the thickest part of the trunk wouldn’t bother me on the way up, but I’d still have to come down. I stopped in front of a very tall, slightly curving alder that was about a foot wide at the bottom. Penny

handed me my jacket.

I started up. It got easier as the trunk got slimmer. Twenty feet. I stopped to rest and looked down.

“You look good!” Penny said.

I continued up. Thirty feet. The trunk was perfect for me now, about nine inches wide. I stopped and puffed. I looked up — I wanted to go to the first branch, pluck a leaf as a souvenir.

Forty feet. I was getting tired. About 10 more feet to the first branch. Come on, Ariel. forty-five feet. Nothing could stop me now. I looked down. Wow! It was scary to look, but I was proud.

Fifty feet, and some sway. I wrapped one arm around the trunk and reached out for a leaf. “Thank you, tree. You are great! I hope it’s okay that I take a leaf.”

I slipped the leaf into my pocket and started down. Forty. Thirty. My arms were shaking. I rested.

“Are you okay, Ariel?”

“Just shaky.” The trunk was getting bigger, and I had to hold tight with my legs, as my arms didn’t feel like they had much strength left. Twenty feet. I could hardly feel my arms!

“Don’t let your mind limit you, Ariel!”

Hold on, arms. I don’t care if I can’t feel you, just hold on!

Ten feet. Five. I almost fell on top of Penny.

I lay there, staring up at the tall tree. Thank you, tree. You took me a little closer to God, and made me a little stronger.

After several minutes, I pulled the leaf out of my pocket and showed it to Penny.

She smiled. “What’s next?”

“Earth,” I said.

We walked to the north end of wildest section of the park. I wanted to do the hardest part first, the forest run.

“I’ll get my bike and meet you at the picnic tables, then I can ride along with you on the two miles.”

“Okay. I’m going to be ready for lunch after this!”

I darted into the woods, sliding between slender trees. It was a good half

mile or more to the picnic area. Along a fallen log and into the bushes I hopped. Soon I was climbing upward toward the hill. I didn't want to go to the top, but I couldn't avoid part of it. The brush was thinner, but stickier vines tore at my legs. I trotted at an even pace and pulled free each time one tried to trip me.

Near the crest of the hill I had to duck under bushes and watch for rabbit holes. My foot went into one hole, but I stopped myself quick with my other foot so I wouldn't pull any muscles. Back on my feet, down hill.

The swampy part. I hopped between clumps of grass and logs. I was in a slightly different place than ever before. My eyes were wide and my mind alert for the deep muddy places. I heard a crow above me but didn't dare look. Finally out of the swamp and into the woods. Lots of thick fir to brush past, looking hard for berry vines between trees that would trip me or tear my skin.

I burst through some trees and came face to face with a huge anthill. No thank you, back and around. Not much farther now. More brush, more thorns. Along a log, and another. I'm tired. Keep going, feet! My ankles were starting to sting, and I wondered if a vine got me and I hadn't noticed. Through the trees.

I could hear voices ahead. The picnic area! Down a little hill, across a clearing, through the trees.

"Ariel!"

There was Penny and her bike at a picnic table with some other people. I started walking to catch my breath.

With a grin on her face, Penny said, "These folks forgot their matches, and I thought maybe you could help them get their barbeque started."

I was breathing hard, hands on my knees. I realized what Penny was saying — she wanted me to do my Fire test.

"There's the biggest anthill in there I've ever seen!" I gasped.

"You just came through the wild area? It must have taken you hours!" the man said.

Penny looked at her watch. "Fourteen minutes from Carter Road."

"You're bleeding!" the lady said, pointing at my leg.

"A blackberry got me. I'm okay," I said. Penny tossed me my fire pouch.

"Aren't you a little young to carry matches?" the man said.

"Oh, I don't carry matches." I gathered some twigs off the ground, went over to the barbeque, and opened my pouch. I took a little burnt cloth and a cotton ball, and set up my tinder right on the charcoal. The three of them gathered around to watch.

My first two sparks went wide, but the next one nestled into the cotton ball. I blew carefully on it, nudged the cloth closer. A tiny flame. I blew life into it and laid twigs on. When a little fire was burning, the man got his kerosene out and thanked me.

"Will you two eat lunch with us? You saved me a trip to town!"

I *was* hungry. I looked at Penny and she nodded. "Sure!" I decided it would be nice to rest before my run.

The man grilled hot dogs and I let the lady look at my ankles. I had gotten a good scratch. "I have an herbal salve that will keep it from itching. Would you like me to put some on?"

"What is it?"

"Goldenseal root," she said. "Also, it will help it heal."

"Okay." I held up my pants leg and she spread the yellow-green goo onto the scrapes. It felt nice.

Hot dogs, potato salad, cookies and milk. I ate lightly — I knew I couldn't do my run if I was stuffed.

"Why would you want to run through the wild area?" the man asked.

"Because it teaches me faith in myself and in God," I said.

He didn't ask any more questions.

After eating, we thanked them and walked around so my lunch would settle.

"You only have the run and the swim to go!" Penny said.

I was dreading the swim, but I didn't tell her. I tried to keep my mind on the two mile run. "Thanks, Penny, for letting me help them with the fire. You could have done it."

"*Tomorrow* is my big day."

We walked a little more. Finally I said I was ready, and we strolled to the starting place.

"I'll talk to you again at Williams Road," I said.

“Good luck!”

I started, not too fast. Pace yourself, Ariel. It's a long way.

My side didn't give me much trouble, but I was tired almost from the start. After about a mile, I really had to make myself keep going. Glancing at Penny on her bike gave me courage — she would be doing it tomorrow. Breathe, 2, 3, 4. Breathe, 2, 3, 4.

There was Williams Road! Penny pedaled ahead and waited. I plodded up to the road and slower to a walk.

“It was . . . easier than I . . . expected it . . . to be.”

“Free ride back to the park. Hop on!”

I let the breeze dry the sweat on my face as Penny took us back. I dug my bike out of the bushes, and then it all hit me — I had climbed into a large maple, swung on a 60 foot long rope, shimmied 50 feet up I an alder, run through the wildest part of the woods, lit a fire with no matches, and then run two miles! And now I was going to swim a mile in salt water! All because I was trying to do something, be something . . . and I didn't quite know what.

“Ariel?”

“I was just remembering the things I've done today. More than I have ever done before in one day. Let's go!”

I was feeling good on the ride out to the swimming inlet. I felt a lot of energy inside me — not so much my own strength, after all I had done, but something else, something that wasn't quite me.

I stood on the sand and looked at the dark blue water at high tide. Penny handed me my swimsuit.. I looked around, stripped, and pulled it on. I looked at the water some more.

“Scary?”

“Yeah. I know I want to do it. I know it will be hard, and close, but somehow that's why I have to do it. Close. Very close.” I waded into the water and started swimming.

I was hardly aware of what I was doing. My arms dug at the water. My mouth grabbed air. I didn't stop to see where I was and I didn't break my rhythm. Two kicks per stroke, three strokes per breath. Slow and steady. I knew where the buoy was. I could see it in my mind. I couldn't feel the water anymore. I was floating above it and I could see myself swimming. There,

dead ahead of me was the buoy. I could see myself reach up and touch it, turn and head back toward the shore. Without thinking about it, I went to a breath every stroke.

It seemed like I was seeing myself from farther and farther away. I was moving toward the shore, but slower and slower. Then I was completely still, but only half way back from the buoy. I could see that my arms weren't moving anymore. I thought I heard a voice, but it seemed to be coming from far away. What was it saying? I tried to hear.

"Float, Ariel!"

Float? Why? Then I felt something cold and salty in my mouth, and an alarm sounded somewhere inside me. Move, arms! Turn me over! I was back in my body, and I could see water. I could feel my arms moving. I could see sunlight and water splashing. I was gasping for air, trying to float.

"Float, Ariel!"

A part of my mind took over that I had been training for months. My arms went out and my feet started kicking. I had to conserve energy. I had to get onto my back and float.

"You want help?"

Penny. She was with me. "No. Am I at shore?"

"A hundred yards."

"Right direction?"

"Yeah. You're doing great."

I floated and kicked. Penny kept talking to me. "Just a little more. You look great, Ariel!"

I felt sand under me. I tried to get to my hands and knees but stumbled. I felt slender arms helping me onto the beach. Then everything went dark.



Chapter 12

I woke up with my head in my friend's lap.

"Penny?"

"I'm right here."

"How long did I sleep?"

"About an hour."

I remembered the swim, how I felt strong, but not from my own strength, how I was so lightheaded and floating above myself. I remembered seeing myself stop swimming, and hearing Penny, and tasting the salt water.

"Thanks," I said.

"For what? You did it. You swam all the way back."

"You had your suit on."

"I was worried. You seemed drained, somehow," Penny said.

"I was. I'm glad you had your suit on. I nearly needed help. But thanks for letting me finish, too."

Penny smiled, "You finished all your tests!"

"And I learned something about my limits. I reached them on that swim. Penny? You don't have to push yourself tomorrow like I did."

"I already decided," she said. "I don't think I *can* push myself like you did. But I think I understand why you needed to. You're the leader, and you had to know your limits."

"Something like that," I said.

"I'm going to do my runs last tomorrow."

"That's good. I should have done that. But then maybe I wouldn't have found my limits."

Penny set my head on the sand and went over to the bikes. "Let's eat something. I don't want to have to carry you home."

"Yeah!"

After food and juice and rest, I felt better, but I don't think I could have done anything more than pedal myself slowly home. I was thoughtful as we rode. We were both quiet, me remembering the day, Penny probably thinking about tomorrow. Once in a while we would look at each other and grin.

When we got to my house, Mom could tell I had had a hard day, but she didn't ask any questions. We arranged for Penny to spend the night. When Dad got home, I gave him a big hug and started crying right there in his arms.

"What's wrong, Honey?"

"Nothing. I just realized how very much I love you and Mom, that's all."

I ate like a horse at dinner. Later, in my room, I wrote two words in the Grimoire:

Tests passed.

Penny started a page for herself. I put my alder leaf in my treasure box, crawled into bed, and fell fast asleep.



"Ariel?"

"Is it morning?"

"Your mom is calling us to breakfast."

"Food!" I hopped up. "I slept like a log!"

"You went to bed at 8:00 last night! I sat up and read one of your paperbacks."

"A romance?"

"You know me."

I porked out again. My mom was amazed.

"She used up a lot of energy yesterday," Penny said, smiling.

After breakfast I looked at my leg. "Mom, we need to get some goldenseal salve. It works great on cuts and scratches."

"I'll look for it."

We packed big lunches, got our ropes and everything, and headed for the park.

Penny went up a maple tree she had never climbed before, and we had fun on a 45 or 50 foot swing. Next she went about 40 feet up a slender alder, and brought back a leaf like I had.

"Master of the Air!" I said.

Over in the picnic area, she easily built a fire. We roasted marshmallows and each ate half a sandwich. To the inlet.

Penny swam the mile without stopping. It was beautiful.

"Master of Fire and Water!" I said.

"I'd like to try the four mile swim across the bay next summer," she said.

I slowly nodded.

We ate lunch there on the beach. I was proud of my younger friend. "You know, Penny, it doesn't matter one bit to me that you aren't pushing yourself like I did. We will both pass, and that's what counts."

"But you don't know that I plan to run *three* miles!"

"Great! And that will be very last, so you can really find your limits if you want to!"

"Yep! And if there's an ounce of strength in me at three, I'll go for four!"

We rode back to the park and Penny headed into the wild area. I rode around to meet her. Alone in the picnic area, I went over my tests again in my mind. I made a promise to myself — to continue to get better at all the things we were doing.

Penny came loping out of the woods, tired but happy. We laughed and hugged and she drank more juice.

Her last test began. I rode along or a little ahead. I cheered as she passed two miles, and rode to the three mile mark to wait. She arrived, and I thought she was going to stop, but she turned around and headed back toward the park! Four miles. Then five. She was going very slowly now. There was the park just down the road. She was going for six miles!

I rode on ahead.

She was barely moving, but still on her feet. "Come on, Penny!" She ran slowly onto the playground and fell on the grass, lungs heaving.

“Six miles!” I announced, clapping.

After a few minutes, she got up and walked around. It took a good half hour for her to relax and feel like eating or drinking anything. We just walked around the park together, not saying much of anything.

I looked at the slender girl beside me. I had never been this close to anybody. I had never worked this hard before. And I had one more thought — I had never felt this close to God before.

We finally rode home. Penny wrote in the Grimoire that she had passed her tests.

Out on the driveway, I was trembling with love for my friend. “You are my sister forever.”

“And you are *my* sister forever.”

“Rain check on banana splits, okay?” I suggested. I could see that she was close to falling asleep, and it was only 7:00.

“Yeah. I’m too tired to enjoy one right now.”

I waved as she got on her bike and rode slowly home.



Chapter 13

In middle school, I had to get used to going to several different classes. Penny and I met at one of our houses to do homework and talk almost everyday. We were up early Saturday to get the first bus to the college.

As soon as we found the room, the teacher, a tall slender man, came up to us. "You must be the ones auditing the course. You look pretty young to need Wilderness First Aid and Rescue."

"I'm 11, sir, and we're in the wilds all the time," I said.

"At least one day a week," Penny said. "Almost everyday during vacations."

"Hmm. You know that being able to swim is a prerequisite of the course?"

"Yes, Sir," I said.

"How for can you swim?"

"A mile or more." I didn't count my test day when I was already tired.

"Hmm. What stroke?" he asked.

"Front crawl. Bilateral breathing."

"Well. But this will be in a lake, you understand."

"Oh. I'm not really used to lake swimming."

"I thought so," he said.

"I've done almost all my swimming in the inlet," I continued.

"You have?"

"Yes, Sir. To the channel buoy and back."

"Hmm. And you? You look even younger."

"I'm nine," Penny said.

"Swim?"

"About two miles."

"In the . . ."

"Yes, Sir. In the inlet. Front crawl, bilateral."

"Well. I guess you're in the class."

"Thank you, Sir!" we both said, grinning.



We found seats. There were 15 people in the class, and no one else was under about 20.

"Okay, everybody," the teacher began, "we are going to move very quickly. I do not recommend you take written notes — most people find I teach too fast and they miss half of it. There are several good books you can use, and I expect all of you to have one available. They are here on the table to look at during break or lunch."

Penny looked at me.

"I'll buy one and we can share it," I whispered.

"This class is different from your usual first aid class. They tell you a few things to do before you contact the Emergency Medical System. In the wilderness, there is no EMS, or it would take too long to get there. So we are not only going to learn how to keep someone alive for a few minutes, but for hours or even days, and how to get them out of the wilderness with no other help, if necessary."

After spending an hour getting someone out of immediate danger, we mastered Cardio-Pulmonary Resuscitation in about two hours. "I expect to see those CPR dummies in use during lunch, and if I don't, I'll start testing people."

We had a short break. The next hour and a half covered bleeding, dressings, and bandaging. We worked on each other, wrapping bandages for all kinds of cuts.

Lunchtime arrived, and most people went outside to smoke cigarettes. Penny and I didn't want to hog the equipment, but no one else was using the CPR dummies, so we grabbed one.

Penny went first. "I have no breath. Pulse? None. I find the sternum —

six compressions. Open the airway — three breaths. Pulse? Not yet. Compressions. Breaths . . .”

The teacher looked into the room, saw only us at the dummies, and frowned, but I knew he wasn't frowning at us. I took my turn next. Finally, a couple of other people wanted to practice, so we ate our lunch while bandaging each other.

Class started, and we spent two hours on all kinds of bone fractures and how to immobilize them or put them in traction. We used sticks, rolled newspapers, and lots of cloth.

A break, during which we practiced splints and stuff, and then an hour on burns. They were scary because there was so little you could do for a bad burn in the wilderness except take antibiotics.

“We have one more hour today. This will be hard for some of you, but I'm going to go around the room and tell each one of you what you really need to work hardest on or else someone could die if they ever need your help.”

Penny and I looked at each other. This sure was different from *our* schools.

He started with a lady in the front. “You're afraid to touch the injured person. They will die without your helpful touch, especially in the wilderness.”

Then the college student guy beside her. “You act as if you have all day. Seconds count in CPR and bleeding. When someone needs you, they need you NOW.”

Before he got to us, only one person in class got a *no problem* comment from him.

Then he stopped in front of us. “I shouldn't spend class time with auditors. Okay, everyone. Read and practice on everything we have covered, especially those areas I mentioned to you, or any that you know you need to work on. Next week, 8:00 am.”

We were both quiet as everyone was leaving. We started to head for the door, but heard the teacher's voice say, “Ariel and Penny.” We went up to his desk, and after everyone else had left, he said, “I didn't want to say it in front of the class, but you two had no weak spots. Read and practice. See you next weeks”

"Thank you, Sir!"

"Thank you!"



We stopped at the bookstore on the way home and got one of the class books.

Monday and Tuesday it rained, so I went to Penny's house after school, and we took turns reading to each other from the first aid book.

Wednesday was nice, so we went to the park to flex our muscles. We climbed trees and ran around some.

"Ariel, I didn't tell you then, because we were busy with our tests, but I found something I want to show you." She led me into the wild area, into the wildest part of the wild area if anything. We went to the far side of the hill, where I had never gone before. After crawling under some of the wickedest thorn bushes I had ever seen, we started going up another hill, not as high as the one I knew.

The top of the hill was all covered with cedars — the most beautiful cedar grove I had ever seen.. The smell was wonderful! In the middle was an open space, about 25 feet across, covered in a blanket of cedar needles, and almost completely roofed over by the big trees.

I walked all around the grove. There was no sign that anybody had ever been there before. "Penny, could this be . . . our magical Grove?"

She smiled. "Just what I was thinking!"

We explored some more. "What's that way?" I asked, pointing east.

"Perkins Road is over there somewhere, but I don't think there's anything on it but pastures," she said.

I kept my ears open for people or car sounds, but couldn't hear any. Walking around some more, I started to think of this place as *our* Grove. "Penny, I think this place was made just for us. The Magic Circle could be here in the big clearing. And over in this space, where there are no boughs overhead, we could make a fire pit. What do you think?"

"I love it!" she said. "The first Saturday we have free, let's come here and really explore and make sure it's safe."

"Yeah. I'd like to build a campfire here someday after dark, and one of us can ride our bike around on all the nearest roads and trails to see if it can be

seen.”

We walked around some more, and I found a cedar that had a hollow place under it where we could keep things. We lay down in the main clearing and looked up into the curving branches. The ground there was like a cushion. It was the most magical place I had ever been. And it was ours!

“Thank you, Penny. It’s perfect!”

As it was getting dark, we reluctantly headed home. On the way back, Penny said, “Let’s always take a different way, so we don’t wear a trail.”

“Agreed,” I said.



As class started Saturday morning, the teacher had a CPR dummy up front, and called on a lady. “You find no breath but a pulse.” She immediately started compressions, so he said, “You may have just killed the person.” He went on to warn us about doing chest compressions on anyone with a pulse. They lady was red-faced for a while, but recovered.

We spent two hours on unconsciousness, shock, and convulsions. Taking turns having different kinds of symptoms, including the ones from the week before, each of us gave treatment several times. The one I got needed CPR, some bleeding stopped, treatment for shock, and then antibiotics. After the break, we had an hour on poisons — snake bites, skin irritating plants, and food poisoning. “I’m not going into caustics and such because I presume that anyone with enough brains to get into the wilderness isn’t going to bring along a can of lye and eat it. Read about that stuff in your books.”

I put it in the back of my mind to learn more about herbs and salves like goldenseal for the scrapes and scratches we always got.

At lunch we practiced with the CPR dummies and read from our book while we ate.

After lunch came exposure, frost bite, hypothermia, heat stroke, and all those. “Remember, this course is not about wilderness *survival*, but in all cases, prevention is, of course, the best medicine.”

After the break, emergency childbirth. Everyone was embarrassed when he brought out the plastic pregnant lady who only went from the neck to the knees. “The most important thing to remember is that birth is a natural process. In about 90% of all cases, the birth could occur with no assistance.”

We learned about how the cord can get caught, and how the feet can come first. With the model, he showed us when to encourage the lady to push, and when to have her breathe instead. Last came how to keep the baby warm after it was born. It was all so amazing.

"We meet here at 8:00 next week, then carpool to Green Lake."



I was in the school library one day that week, and I found a little book, *Mythical Woods Creatures*.

The term Sprite is applied to a mythical woodfolk when no other label, such as Fairy, Dwarf, Gnome, Leprechaun, etc., seems to apply. In legend, Sprites are generally elusive, uncatchable, nearly invisible creatures bordering on the ethereal. Indeed their name is derived from the Latin Spiritus . . .

Sprites! That's what we shall be. Penny and I had ruled out names like Druids because of their sacrifices, and Witches because of their supposed connection with the devil and sex. We were reading things about Druids, Witches, Wizards, and lots of others, but we just didn't want to use their names. Sprites! I couldn't wait to tell Penny.

She liked it. We did some alder climbing that week, but we didn't want to visit the Grove again until we had time to explore.

Thursday we both swam 2 miles without stopping.



Saturday morning everyone packed into cars and we were at the lake by 8:45. Everyone said the water felt cold, but it was normal swimming water to us.

"Again I say, we are not learning water safety here. Read up on it. We are concerned about *after* the problem occurs. Being in water is one of those *immediate dangers* that we have to deal with even before pulse and breathing. Everyone get wet."

We didn't want to show off, so we just splashed around with everyone else. Then we learned how to hold someone you are rescuing and still be able to swim. Both conscious and unconscious. Each of us tried it a couple of times.

Penny always seemed to get the big, heavy ones, but she did it. The sun came out and warmed us.

Penny and I ate lunch by the water and read the class book. Most everyone else drove to the cafe down the road to eat.

Next came CPR complicated by water in the lungs. I noticed some teenagers in a canoe about half a mile out. We practiced rescues again, going out 200 yards this time. Suddenly, we all heard a scream and a splash. I looked. The canoe had turned over. The teacher pulled off his shirt and dove in.

I looked at Penny and a heartbeat later we were both in motion. Seconds behind the teacher, we were in the water, swimming our fastest.

When we got out there, it seemed like the older guy could swim, but didn't know how to help the others. There was a younger boy going under, and the teacher grabbed him. One of the girls was freaking out, and the other one looked like she was going down.

"Penny! Get the one in trouble!" I yelled. Then I grabbed the girl who was freaking out.

I tried to say some nice things, but it didn't work, so I slapped her. "Relax or drown!" I yelled at her. It worked. I got her in a chest carry. "Just help me by kicking," I said in a much softer voice.

We all made it back. Other people in the class were already helping Penny's girl who had taken water, and Penny was resting. The teacher got the young boy out, made sure his lungs were clear, checked to see that the older guy was coming, and then took over with Penny's girl. Some other students comforted the girl I brought in.

I sat down beside Penny. "That was an unexpected test!" I said.

"Yeah. Do you think he believes us now that we can swim?" Penny said quietly. We both snickered softly.

They were all okay. The teacher drove them to the cafe, then came back. "Anyone learn anything from that?" he asked.

One lady said, "Never judge anyone by their age." She was looking at us. I was embarrassed but proud.

The last hour was on how to rescue yourself. He showed us ways to float and conserve energy, most of which we knew. We all practiced, then

carpooled back to the college.



Nothing special happened that week at school. I spent most days after school with Penny, studying first aid, or running and climbing in the park. I was keeping up with my homework after dinner each evening, and needless to say, I didn't watch much TV.

Our last Saturday class. We started with review, then learned about all kinds of signaling — fires, mirrors, flares, smoke, dye, flags, code, you name it.

After the break, we did transport, from stretcher to helicopter. We learned when you could move someone, and when you might as well just bury them. Broken backs and necks gave me the creeps.

As the class broke up for lunch, the teacher stopped us. "Ariel and Penny, you two are done. This afternoon is all testing for the credit students. I am really pleased with your work, and I was wondering if you would be available to help me with some demonstrations. Starting in January, I will be going around to a number of schools, doing water rescue and first aid demos. Your transportation and lunch would be provided."

"That would be neat!" I said.

"It sure would!" Penny said.

"Even though you don't get college credit, here are your certificates of completion."

We looked at the fancy certificates and thanked him.

"Talk to your parents about the demos in January, and I'll call in a few weeks."

On the way to town, Penny said, "As I remember, I owe you a banana split!"

"And as I remember, I owe you one!"



Chapter 14

Because of one family thing or another, Penny and I didn't get back to the Grove until mid-October. But when we finally did, we made a day of it. I packed my daypack with food, coat, Athame, and a book on magic I was reading. Penny brought a detailed map of the area she found. We stashed our bikes and sat down to plan our adventure.

"If we go up the stream," I said, pointing at the map, "past the spring and into these woods, maybe we can circle around to the east and see if there are any roads or trails over there."

"I'll draw whatever we find on the map," Penny said.

We started walking up the stream amongst maples and firs. There were often old roads in these woods, but they were grown up in young trees, and you could tell how long since they'd been used by how big the trees were.

We came to the spring and had a cold, fresh drink. There was a little meadow beyond, which we crossed quickly. Back in the woods, we found a deer trail that ran east. We guessed that the Grove was about a quarter mile north of us, so as we followed the trail, we looked for any paths going off that way.

The trail faded, to the point that we didn't think it had been used for many years. Ferns and vines closed in on us. We were just about to strike into the woods when we spotted an old wooden house.

"Look at that, Ariel! It looks ancient!" We peeked into a window. The floor inside couldn't even be walked on.

"I'm amazed the roof is still on it," I said. "Seen enough?"

"I bet the berry vines are holding up the roof. Let's go."

Once we were in the woods and away from the vines and brush of the clearing, it was easier going. We worked our way north through alders until we thought we had gone about a quarter mile. Gulls flew by over the trees.

"Ariel, I think we should go straight east from here and see what's there and how far, and then we can come back and find the Grove."

"Okay," I said.

We wandered eastward. Alders changed to firs. After a while we came to a fence, and could see the pastures on Perkins Road beyond. A car went by in the distance.

"How far would you say it is to that road?" Penny asked.

"Three hundred yards or so," I said.

Penny made a line on the map. "This should be the fence line. It's probably the park's property line."

We headed back west to find our Grove. Firs, then alders. We passed the place where we had come from the old house, and kept going. A few minutes later we came to the same kind of wicked thorn bushes we had gone through on the other side. Did they go all the way around the Grove? We crawled, and finally came through them and started going uphill.

There was our Grove, ahead and a little more to the north.

"You know something, Penny. I haven't even seen an old logging stump anywhere between the thorns and the Grove. Could it be . . . that no one has ever come here before?"

"I bet the people who lived in that old house came here," Penny said.

"I guess you're right. But no sign of a road or trail, at least on the south side."

"I'm hungry," she said. "Let's wait until after lunch to explore the north side, okay?"

"Sure. I want to build a fire pit, if you think the place I picked is okay," I said.

"I think so. Let's think of all the different things we want to do here."

We arrived at the top of the hill, among the cedars. It was exactly as we remembered it.

"We might want to camp here in the summer," Penny said.

"Hey, great! That would be fun!" I said. "Those flat places between the outer trees would be good for tents and sleeping bags."

We sat on a log and nibbled our lunch. It was a still, dreamy day, not too cold, and I was glad to slow down after the rush of September.

"Shall we go trick-or-treating together?" I asked.

"You really want to? I didn't know kids in middle school did that anymore."

"*They* don't. But *I* do!"

"Are you going to any parties?" she asked.

"I don't have that kind of friends anymore, remember? But I'd love to go to all the Haunted Houses, if you'd like to."

"I'd love to!" Penny said. "My mom thinks you're a good influence on me, and she'll let me do almost *anything* with you, especially since the First Aid class."

"My mom thinks you're a good influence on me too. For a while she thought the minute I started middle school I was going to start smoking, take drugs, get pregnant, and play hard rock at full blast. I was almost sorry to have to disappoint her."

We ate in silence for a while, then I went off to collect rocks for a fire pit.

"I think we're right about here," Penny said when I got back, showing me the map.

"After we learn more about the place, would you draw a map of the Grove in our Grimoire?"

"Sure!" she said.

We left our packs behind and headed east again, this time to explore the area northward. We came to the fence line again and followed it. The first thing that caught our attention was an old road that ran back west. It was ten feet tall in young alders, but it could lead people to us, so we worked our way along it.

After a while it curved north and took us up to Carter Road. We were glad. We walked along the road for a little ways, then cut back into the wild area woods.

"This is about how I found it," Penny said. "I went to the left of the High Hill, then found those wicked thorns. I got confused for a while which way

was which, so I went through the thorns.”

“I wonder if we can see it from the High Hill.”

We climbed the hill and tried to look eastward through the trees. “I can’t see anything,” I said.

“Maybe someone could see a fire at night from here,” Penny said.

“Hardly anybody ever comes here even during the day!”

We decided to walk all the way around the thorn hedge to see if it really did completely surround the Grove. We went north first, then back down south to where we started, between the two hills. It was solid, and no sign of a track anywhere. The walk around had taken a long time, and it was getting toward late afternoon.

“That’s almost spooky, but I’m glad it’s there,” I said. “The chances of anyone wanting to go through that without a bulldozer are pretty small.”

“I don’t think bull dozers are allowed in the park,” Penny said with a grin.

We crawled through the thorns.

“This place will be super-secret, right?” Penny said.

“Yeah. And no one gets to come here until they are a trusted and tested member of the Grove!”

We climbed back up to the cedars. I stretched out on the soft needles and munched potato chips.

“Goodness, Truth, and Beauty.”

“What?” Penny asked.

“The three main spiritual values. From a book I was looking at.”

“I kind of know how to tell goodness and beauty. How do you know what truth is?” she asked.

I thought for a while. “I’m not exactly sure, Penny. I guess we just have to keep our eyes and ears open. I’m so sleepy. I could just take a nap right here.”

“Me too. It’s so quiet and peaceful.”



“Penny?” I woke up and everything was dark. “Penny! Wake up!”

“What’s wrong? Why is it dark?”

“We fell asleep. What time is it?” I asked.

“I’d tell you if I could see my watch!”

I looked around. I was starting to be able to make out the shapes of the trees, but nothing else. There were thick clouds in the sky, and not a hint of moonlight or starlight.

"What are we going to do, Ariel?"

"Well, we're Sprites, aren't we? If we can run through these woods in the daylight, I hope we can at least *crawl* out of them in the dark."

"I hope so too!" she said, but didn't sound completely sure.

"Maybe that would be a good thing to add to our training. All of the ancient holiday celebrations start at night, and if we come here for them, we'll have to be able to do it in the dark."

"Okay . . . but I'm . . . a little . . . afraid of the dark."

"I was afraid of alder trees."

"Yeah. And I was afraid of maples."

We groped around and got all our stuff into the daypacks.

"Jeez, it's dark! I can only see things if they're silhouetted against the sky."

"Me too."

We held hands and started down the hill, feeling and groping our way along.

"Wait a minute! You're going too fast!"

"Ouch! What's that?"

"A tree."

After a little ways, we found we did better without holding hands.

"I'm going over a log now. Branches sticking out."

"Okay, I feel it."

"Some vines here, and a rabbit hole."

"I think we should go a little bit more to the right."

"Okay. A tree right here."

It seemed to take hours, but we finally came to the thorn hedge.

"Your turn to lead," I said.

"Thanks. I'm crawling. Ouch! Thorns on both sides."

"I'm coming. Ouch!"

"Can't go straight. To the right."

"Ouch!"

I think that 10 feet took half an hour, but we got through it.

“Whew!”

“Quiet! What’s that?!”

“I don’t know!”

We listened. Crunch. Snap. Crunch. I reached out and took Penny’s hand. Snap. Scrape.

“I’m scared!” Penny whispered.

I squeezed her hand.

“Ariel, what . . .”

Just as she spoke, something bounced away, crashing through the trees.

“I caught a glimpse of it, Penny. Deer!”

“I’ve never been so scared in my life! And I love deer.”

We both stood up.

“I’m convinced now, Penny. If we’re going to call ourselves Sprites, we have to get used to the dark.”

“Okay, I suppose so,” she said. We started working our way through the woods again, toward, we hoped, the picnic area. I was leading again.

“Big tree here . . .” I froze. I couldn’t say anything. Two green eyes were looking at me. “P-penny!” I gasped.

“What is it?”

“Eyes!”

I felt her beside me. “Fox?” she whispered.

I slowly stooped down and felt for something. A stick. I stood up and tossed it toward the eyes. They disappeared with a hiss and ran away through the woods.

“Cat!” Penny said.

We continued our journey, Penny leading.

“Tall ferns and brush. Tree on the right.”

“Got it.”

It wasn’t too much longer before we could see the light at the picnic area, and that helped us, first by silhouetting things, then by giving some real light. We ran out into the open space and laughed our heads off.

“Wood Sprites afraid of the dark!” Penny said. “We’ll have to fix that!”

We got our bikes and headed home, wondering what to tell our parents.



Chapter 15

For the American Indian, the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood usually included a period of about three days during which the youth went alone to a special hill or wood. He took little or nothing with him, and was forced to deal with any fears he had of the dark or being alone. This rite usually included the Vision Quest, an attempt to gain contact with and insight from the Spirit World . . .

A tap on my shoulder interrupted me.

"Hi, Ariel." It was a girl I was getting to be friends with. "What're you reading?"

"Just some stuff about rights of passage."

"Is that like civil rights?"

"Not really," I said.

"There's a guy in math class that likes you."

"Really? Who?"

"That Phillip guy with buck teeth."

"Really? What do you know about him?" I asked, sort of interested.

"Too weird! But I know someone else who likes you."

"Who?"

"That Tim behind you in Social Studies."

"What's he like?"

"He wants your body!"

"Thanks, Jenny."

"Well?" she said.

"Well what?"

"Which one are you gonna go with?"

"I don't think I'm into boys right now, unless a really nice one comes along," I said

"Aren't you going to the Halloween Dance?" she prodded.

"No. It's on Halloween night."

"When did you expect it to be, Christmas?"

"I'm going trick-or-treating."

"You're crazy!"

We had to go off to class. I didn't think my friendship with Jenny would go very deep.

All that day I pondered the Vision Quest. Three days alone. That's two nights! No equipment. Wow. It sounded like just what we needed for our training, but I couldn't see how we could get away with more than two days and one night. And we would have to do some careful begging and pleading for that much.



After school I started my secret plan. Five more yards of blue cloth. This one would be a little longer than mine.

When I got home from the yardage store, I learned that my First Aid and Rescue teacher had called that day and talked to Mom. When Dad got home, they talked about it for a long time in the kitchen while I cut out the cloak pieces in the family room watching TV.

Dad came in. "Why didn't you tell me you could swim a mile? Do you know that's 35 laps? And in cold lake water! And why didn't you tell me you rescued someone?"

I looked at him. "Because, Dad, it's a very personal thing for me. I didn't do it for a medal or anything, and I wish he hadn't told you. Anyway, I can swim two miles or more in colder water than Green Lake."

"But, Honey, it's wonderful!"

"Then why do I feel like I'm being punished?"

"Honey, we just want to share . . ."

"Do you know what the word *personal* means, Dad? I'm sorry, but it's not a school thing and it's not a family thing. Okay?"

There was silence between us for a while.

"Do you want to do those first aid demonstrations?" he finally said.

"Yes, Dad."

"Will it effect your school work?"

"I'll keep up with the work, but I don't know what they'll think about the absences."

"We'll take care of that part."

"Thanks, Dad. Would you do me one more favor? Call Penny's mom and make sure she can do it too. I don't want to if Penny can't. Did you know that Penny can swim even better than me, and she rescued the girl who was drowning? I only had the scared one."

"Penny's a good friend, isn't she?"

"Yep."

The next night I got the pieces sewn together, but I wanted to wait until she tried it on to do the hems. Then I got out the scrap box, which was okay for me to use, and thought about my own cloak. I wanted some pockets on the inside, belt loops, and a tie at the neck for cold weather. I got ambitious, and even put zippers on a couple of the inside pockets.



Penny came over on Saturday.

"I heard you would only do the demos if I could too. I can!"

"Great!" I said.

I took her into my room, made her close her eyes, and put the cloak in her hands. "Okay, open them!"

"Ariel! I was wondering how I was going to get one like yours. Thanks!"

"It still needs hemming. Put it on." She looked in the mirror and I put pins in. "I made it extra long for you."

"I'm a string bean. Don't rub it in."

I sewed up the hems, and we made a belt. I showed her the improvements I had made to mine, and then we did the same to hers, except that I was out of zippers.

Penny worked on the map of the Grove in our Grimoire while I told her

about the Vision Quest ideas.

"That sounds so scary. No sleeping bag or anything?"

"We'd do it in the summer. Do you want to, next summer?" I asked.

"I . . . sure. As long as we practice being in the dark a lot before then," she said.

"Don't worry! I'd flip out too if I tried it right now."

The map looked good — old fashioned. All the road names were in calligraphy, the Old House was marked, and the High Hill, and the different kinds of woods.



Halloween. Penny's mom drove us to the Haunted House at the college, but we couldn't talk her into going in. We had decided not to wear our cloaks in public, so we just wore some green and white make-up. The House was pretty good, with lots of actors in costume and strobe lights and stuff. Penny's mom took us out for hamburgers on the way home.

Then we went to the Haunted House at the high school. It was funnier than the college one. Her mom wanted us to start trick-or-treating before dark, so at 5:00 we put on our cloaks and jewelry and just kind of walked around and talked about magic spells and stuff.

About 6:00 it was getting dark. We were on a little street without any streetlights. We were thinking of starting to go to some houses, when all of a sudden there was the sound of engines roaring several blocks behind us. We looked, and saw two motorcycles coming this way, fast.

I looked at Penny. "Time to be invisible, fellow Sprite!" We pulled up our hoods and ducked into a bush.

Just as the motorcycles got to us, there was the sound of gun shots and breaking glass. They roared on past and turned a corner.

"Jeez!" Penny said.

We stayed frozen in the bush. A man came out of the house that had been hit. Some neighbors came out and talked to him.

"Damn punk kids!"

Then I saw blue lights flashing way down the street. "Penny!" I whispered. "Let's get out of here! I don't want anyone to think we did it!" We looked around.

“Straight back between those houses!” Penny said.

“Stay low!”

We waited until no one was looking, then crept away. Between the houses. Through a gate. Toward the woods behind the houses.

“Eeek!” Penny said and fell with a thud.

I got down beside her and felt around. “Feels like clothesline,” I said. Then I remembered the Athame on my belt.

“Look, Ariel! The cops are out there!”

I could see the blue lights flashing and spotlights being shined everywhere. I reached for the knife, and feeling Penny’s legs with my other hand, cut through the twisted cords.

She wiggled free.

“Let’s go!” I said.

We dashed into the woods and ducked down just as a powerful flashlight searched the yard we had been in. “No one here,” he said.

“Roger,” crackled his radio.

“That was close!” I whispered.

“I’m sure glad you had the knife!” she said.

We were silent for a minute, watching the commotion.

“Isn’t this what Halloween is supposed to be like?” I asked.

“Yeah! Let’s go!”

Now we were in a mischievous mood, and it was completely dark. We lurked through the woods and came out on another street.

“Still have your bag?” Penny asked.

I pulled it out of a cloak pocket and unfolded it. “Sure do!”

We started trick-or-treating. First we hid on both sides of the door, and when they opened it, jumped out and yelled, “Boo!” Only one old man didn’t like it.

When we got tired of that, we just stood there a moment as the door opened, faces hooded in shadow, then raised our arms and made haunting noises. They all liked that one.

We circled around a few other streets, lurking in the shadows and hiding when cars came by. We were getting good at it!

The piles of candy, fruit, nuts, and cookies we made at my house was

amazing! We did some swapping and then went into my room and lit the candles.

“Penny, I want to show you something I found.” We huddled together at my desk in the candlelight. “You know how witches’ brews are always made of weird stuff that no one could ever really get, like eye of newt, wing of bat, and all that?”

“Yeah.”

“I found out it’s a code! And in this little book I found is a list of what each thing really is. They are herbs and plants and stuff, and a few simple chemicals.”

“Neat! So if we wanted to make one of those old potions, we could find out what all the ingredients really are.”

“Yeah. I’m going to put them into the Grimoire.”

We talked on into the evening, and about 10:00 Penny’s mom picked her up. I got out my pens and lettered.

Witches Brew

Bloody Fingers - foxglove

Candlemas Maiden - snowdrop

Crown for a King - wormwood

Dew of the Sea - rosemary

Eye of the Star - horehound

Little Dragon- tarragon

Maiden’s Ruin - southernwood

Ram’s Head - American valerian



Chapter 16

Winter had set in, and we started going to the college pool once a week. I was used to the colder water of the inlet, and I found I got tired faster indoors. We would share a lane and do 30 or 40 laps, then just goof off.

It was early December when I noticed that Penny was carrying around some kind of secret. I tried to pry it out of her, but she wouldn't crack. "You'll see, very soon!" was all she would say.

I invited her to go to Midnight Mass with me, and she invited me to go to her church on Christmas morning. My parents mumbled something about us being too close and why didn't we have other friends, which they did every few months, but I stood firm. I had friends because I liked them and they liked me, not to fill some kind of quota.

They asked me what I wanted for Christmas. I thought for a few days, and then told them candle making supplies — NOT a candle making kit. I made a list — block of wax, dyes, wicking, and tall seamless canisters. They asked me if that was all I wanted.

I hugged my mom and said, "You and Dad love each other and you love me, so I'm happy. I don't need a bunch of stuff. Please just accept that I have to find friends in my own way."

Christmas arrived. The decorated tree in our living room made me think of our Grove, and how pretty the cedars would look with ornaments on them.

"Mom, do we have any old tree ornaments we don't use?"

"Yes, a whole box of them. Why?"

"I know of a Christmas tree that doesn't have any ornaments."

"I'll get out some good ones. That's very thoughtful of you, Ariel."

I helped a lot with Christmas eve dinner, and after dinner we all opened one gift.

"Boots! Good hiking boots! Thank you, Mom and Dad! I can wear them to church tonight!" I guess they had noticed that I had worn a hole in my old ones.

Penny's mom was a little upset when I came by on foot to pick Penny up, but she didn't say much. I had warned Penny, and she was in pants and boots.

Mass was beautiful. I could tell Penny really liked all the candles and the singing. When the priest started to prepare the Eucharist, I whispered to her, "This is magical!"

I walked Penny home, and promised to be ready, in a dress, at 8:30 in the morning.



Mom made Bavarian waffles for breakfast. Yum! Strawberries and ice cream! She and Dad still weren't quite used to the fact that I didn't want to rip open all my presents at the crack of dawn. Just one more way I wasn't a kid anymore.

"These waffles are sure a nice Christmas present, Mom. Thanks! I have time to do the dishes."

"When do you want to open gifts, Honey?"

"How about this afternoon when Granny is here?"

"Well . . . I think she'd like that!"

When Penny and her mom got there, I tossed my apron and hopped in their car.

"Merry Christmas, friend!" she said. We hugged each other. "Thanks for the calligraphy paper! I want to learn illumination, and I got some little paint brushes too that will help."

"Neat! I haven't opened anything yet, except the boots you saw last night."

The church they went to was smaller, and everyone was all dressed up. The minister said something I wanted to write down about Mary not being afraid of a commitment that was greater than the ones we usually make. After

the service, there were refreshments, and Penny and I nibbled. A guy sort of started to flirt with me. He asked me if I was new in town, and I said no, I was Catholic, so he left.

"Some people in this church don't like Catholics," Penny said.

"What would he have done if I'd told him I was a Druid?"

We both giggled.



The day after Christmas, Penny came over in the afternoon with this big grin on her face. I pretended not to notice and started showing her my block of wax and stuff.

"Ariel, I found a kind of magic I want to learn."

"Really? Didn't you find it two weeks ago?"

She laughed. "Yeah, but I didn't have enough money then. I had to wait until I got \$10 from my grandmother for Christmas." She pulled out a little wooden box. "Are you ready?"

"I'm dying! Hurry up!"

She opened the box, and there was a beautiful set of cards inside, larger than playing cards, and much prettier.

"The Tarot," she said.

"Wow! Are you going to learn how to use them?"

Grinning from ear to ear, she nodded. "Do you want to look at them?"

I started to reach for the mysterious deck of cards, but something made me stop. Something told me that only Penny should touch them. "They are your magic. You can show me, but I shouldn't touch them."

Penny looked at me strangely, but then nodded understanding. She went slowly through the 78 cards. "Aren't they beautiful?" she asked.

"What are the symbols in the corners?"

"I don't know yet, but I'm going to learn!"

"In some of them, I can see symbols hidden in the pictures, too," I said.

She grinned with understanding.

"They're neat, Penny. You have some studying to do, secret studying!"

"For sure!" she agreed. "They came with a little book, but I bet I'll have to go to the college library to learn most of it."

"Hey! Let's go together some Saturday. I want to look for things too."

Penny put the cards back in the box.

"Do you want to make candles with me?" I asked.

"You bet!"

"Candlemas is February 1st and 2nd, and the tradition is that all the candles for the year are blessed on that day. It used to be called Imbolc long ago, and celebrated the sheep getting their milk." Penny was listening with interest. I went on. "I found out what all the different candle colors are for, and I made a page for them in our book." I showed her the page. "I picked blue for our robes, because I had a vision of a group of Druids in a Grove, and one of them was a girl, and she called my name and held out a circlet of leaves to me. They were wearing blue."

"This is interesting," Penny said, looking at the Grimoire. "I bet the colors in the Tarot cards mean something special too. Can we make all these colors? I bet we won't need any black — we won't be doing any exorcisms, will we?"

"I don't think so. I wouldn't know how. I don't have black dye, anyway, but we can make all the rest."

"What kind of candles should we make?" Penny asked.

"We're supposed to use fresh candles for each magical ceremony, so we could make a whole bunch of little dip candles. But we could make some big white ones too for altar candles."

"Are we going to have an altar?"

"Maybe a small one, for candles and stuff we're using," I said.

"And Tarot cards!"

"Yep!"

"When do you want to start making candles?" Penny asked.

"I still have to get a book from the library, and my dad is going to help me break up the block of wax into smaller pieces. I should have it all ready in about a week."

We looked at some more books and talked about school. We both had some new friends, but no one we could share the Grove with.

Dinner time approached and Penny got on her bike to go home. A thought came to me and I yelled after her, "Never use the cards for yourself!"



Chapter 17

Demonstrations were going to be on Wednesdays. It was strange not getting ready for school in the middle of the week, but getting out swimsuit and towel instead.

Mr. Neils picked us up at 9:00, and we drove to a high school about 50 miles away. It had a pool, and we were going to give rescue and CPR demos and lessons. We found the pool and a coach greeted us.

"There's a class before lunch and one after," he said. "The kids don't come in for another half hour, so you can swim if you want to. Need any equipment?"

"This is no-aids rescue," Mr. Neils said.

Penny and I found the girls' locker room and changed. The water was nice and cool, so we jumped in and swam while Mr. Neils got the CPR dummies out of the car. He stopped us at 25 laps.

"I wanted you to warm-up, not exhaust yourselves!"

"We're fine," I said, smiling.

"Penny, did you know you were only breathing every 9 strokes?" he said.

"Yeah. Why?"

"You must be incredibly fit to conserve energy like that."

"All muscle!" she said.

"Here's some candy bars," he said.

"Thanks!" we said and ate a couple.

Soon we could hear the class in the locker room — all boys. They came out

to the pool and the coach herded them into the low bleachers. "Okay, listen up! This is Mr. Neils, a specialist in first aid and rescue, and his two assistants."

"Those wimps!"

"They're just teenyboppers!"

"Listen up! Girls, I saw you warming up. How many laps did you do?"

"Just 25," Penny said.

Dead silence in the bleachers.

"Okay. Now you know who you're dealing with. If you don't want to learn from experts, then you don't need to be on the swim team. I'll hand the class over to Mr. Neils."

"Okay, boys. I'm used to teaching college students, so I'll expect some mature behavior here. We're going to do some rescue demos, and then you'll be trying it. And after that we'll teach you the basics of resuscitation. We'll be using dummies, because you can't practice some parts of CPR on someone who doesn't need it. ANY wise cracks during the demos, and that person is out. Any questions on that?"

He talked about rescue holds while Penny and I sat on the edge of the pool. A few of the younger guys made eyes at us. I kind of ignored it, but I think Penny was excited — and embarrassed.

"Penny, would you be a conscious victim, please."

She gracefully dove in, popped up in the middle and started splashing around yelling, "Help!" The guys laughed.

One guy threw out his arms and said, "I'll save you!"

Mr. Neils gave him a dirty look. "Ariel, chest-carry her in and circle with her near the side."

I dove in and pretended to rescue Penny. We swam together in circles, the teacher explaining the hold and when to use it.

"Okay, you two, clear out."

We dove under the water and headed for the other end of the pool. When we came up, the guys were counting off into two groups. They went in six at a time, and six more rescued them. Then they traded roles. Penny and I sat on the side and talked about which ones were cute.

"I like tall guys, except they usually have bad posture," Penny said.

"I think *he's* cute," I said, pointing at a guy in the water.

"Do you see anybody who looks like a Sprite?"

"Umm. One or two. See that quiet blond guy? He could be deep."

"Maybe."

They finished practicing, and then we showed them how to rescue an unconscious person, including how to get them out of the water. They practiced it, and then we demonstrated what I call water-logged CPR, when the victim already had lungs full of water. We went through the steps with the dummies as Mr. Neils narrated. One guy almost cracked a joke, but caught himself.

After that, Mr. Neils took them one at a time on a CPR dummy. "The rest of you practice rescues. Ariel and Penny will watch and give pointers."

So we just walked around the pool, watching the guys and occasionally saying something. One guy swam over to the side near us and said, "How far can you swim?"

"I start to get tired at about two miles," I said. "Penny still looks fresh."

"Amazing!" he said. "Are you going to the Olympics?"

"Not me!" I said.

"We've got better things to do," Penny said and winked at me.

Class was over and the guys were getting out. The coach told us we could eat lunch in the teachers' lounge. We looked at each other with excitement and headed for the locker room.

The coach showed us where the teachers' lunch line was, then the lounge with our trays.

"Everybody, this is Mr. Neils and his two lovely assistants. These two can out-swim anyone on our swim teams!" All the teachers clapped. I was embarrassed, so I just started eating. After a little while they ignored us, so we could just listen to all the teacher-talk.



After lunch, the coach told us it was an hour before the next swim class, and asked what we would like to do.

"Could we use your library?" Penny asked.

"Of course! I'll show you, and introduce you to the librarian."

The pudgy librarian was excited that someone actually *wanted* to use her

library. I think she would have read the books to us if we had let her, but we said we could find what we wanted. Penny found a book on Tarot cards. I didn't feel like studying, so I just floated around. I kept thinking about the quiet blond guy.

Mr. Neils came and got us. We went through the whole routine with the girls. They seemed harder to me, and took me and Penny even less seriously than the boys. Near the end of class, some snobbish girls challenged us to a race.

"Only if it's okay with your coach," I said.

They went and talked to her. A minute later she blew her whistle and got everybody out of the water.

"You girls didn't believe me when I said these were expert swimmers. Okay, so we have a challenge, which has been accepted. Nine year old Penny and eleven year old Ariel against two swimmers of your choice. We only have a few minutes. One hundred meters — two laps."

The girls talked amongst themselves, and two strong-looking ones stepped up to the starting blocks.

"Are you ready for this, Penny?" I asked.

"Four kicks, one breath per length."

I smiled.

Mr. Neils looked amused. We got ready.

The coach blew her whistle and I dove in, found my form, and started to pull, pull, pull. Turn and breathe. One breath per length was a stretch for me, but in a pinch I could do it. Turn and breathe. I knew Penny was ahead of me, always would be, and that was okay. Turn and breathe. Last length. Pull, pull, pull. Up and breathe!

Penny was standing in the water beside me, but where were the high-school girls? The entire room was laughing. I looked back and saw them making their last turn at the far end. Penny was trying not to crack up. I held it in.

The other girls finished, looked at us standing there, and one said, "You get tired after only one lap?"

"Okay!" yelled the coach. "To the locker room!"

I could see some of the girls who watched telling the racers what

happened.

Mr. Neils came over to us. "Well done. You want to get dressed now?"

"I think we should wait until they go to their next class," I said, still suppressing my laughter.



Chapter 18

On Saturday we were still laughing about the race. But we decided not to race at any nearby schools. We didn't want to make enemies we would have to see again.

I showed Penny the Christmas tree ornaments my mom had given me, and we picked out the ones we wanted to take to the Grove. Some were too plastic-looking, and some had wood and cloth that the rain and snow would ruin.

When we got to the Grove, I said, "If we can make a bunch of candles this month, we can bless them on Candlemas. Can you arrange to come over for dinner on that day?"

"I'll sure try," she said.

We hung the ornaments securely on the trees, and then I worked on the fire pit a little and Penny went around to the hollow place. "I'll clean this out, and we can put some things in here. It looks like it stays dry."

"Great. The ornaments give the Grove a nice sparkle."

We went back out and down to the beach, climbed some trees, and headed home.



"The canisters are a foot high, so we can make dip candles up to that tall. Let's try some white ones first," I said, cramming wax into one canister. We carried everything to the kitchen table, and I put the canister on a low heat.

"Shall I cut wicks?" Penny asked.

"Yeah. A little more than a foot." I handed her scissors and watched the wax melt.

"Where are your parents?"

"Shopping. We can talk. How's Tarot?"

"I've learned about the different kinds of cards. Is this wick long enough? There are 22 major arcana cards. They are the most important ones, and I think you can use them alone sometimes."

I added more wax to the pot and filled an empty one with water.

Penny went on. "Then there are cards numbered one through ten, in four different suits. Is this enough wicks? The suits are Swords, Scepters, Cups, and Coins. There are other names for them too."

"The wax is almost ready. Are those like the four suits in playing cards?"

"Yeah. Playing cards came from the Tarot. Then there are Kings, Queens, Princes, and Knights, all in the four suits."

I got out the towels Mom said we could use. "This is really easy. Dip in the wax, then in the water to cool it, then wipe the water off with the cloth. Wax, water, wipe."

"I didn't think it would be that easy. Neat! Wax, water, wipe."

"That's all there is to dip candles. Later we cut the bottoms off flat if we want to."

It didn't take long to get two candles made. I added a chunk of wax and heated it up again.

"Do we have any candle holders?" Penny asked.

"Not yet, but there's tons down at the thrift shop. I'll get some next week."

We made another pair, one of us dipping while the other wiped.

"You know, Ariel, when you first told me about doing magic, I thought it would be some quick little goofy thing. Now I can see it's not little kid stuff, and we'll be learning about it for years."

"I know what you mean," I said. "But I've learned that there's no other way to do important things. They take time."

"Do you think I should be on a swim team or something?"

"If you want to. I'll root for you."

We started another pair. "I'm going to start another canister of wax. What color would you like to do first?" I asked.

"Pink, for love spells," Penny said.

"You're a romantic!"

"Yeah."

"Know any nice boys yet?" I asked.

"No. Just looking."

We had six tall white candles made, so we let that canister cool. "I was thinking about 4 inches for the little one-spell colored candles."

"Okay. I'll cut wicks."

The wax melted, so I put in a stick of red dye and stirred it with a chopstick. "Look at this color, Penny. Look good?"

"Umm . . . okay. We'll be making red ones too, right?"

"For passion!"

We both giggled.

The little pink candles went quickly. We made six. More dye made red wax. Then a canister of blue.

When we got tired of candle making, we packed them carefully into shoe boxes, and got ready to go out to dinner with my parents.



The next Wednesday was about the same as the first one. Before the class, I practiced swimming the 25-meter length in one breath, but I could only do it for a few laps at a time. Just one of my limits, I guess. The swim teams were smaller at this school, and we didn't get any challenges. I had a hunch our reputation had arrived before us. There was a quick, slender girl I thought would make a good Sprite.



"Some of the symbols on the Tarot cards are astrology," Penny said as we dipped green candles on Saturday. "I've started to read about them. They're kind of like an alphabet, not for sounds, but for deep ideas, mostly about people. I was wondering if I could make a page in the Grimoire for each one? It would take 22 pages . . ."

"Don't worry about it. There are plenty of pages, and astrology stuff is important in other kinds of magic, too. Some books say you have to do certain kinds of magic on certain days or at certain hours because of astrology, but that doesn't seem right to me."

We started yellow candles. "My mom didn't know what to say when I told her about the race at the first demo. Then a few days ago she asked me if I wanted to take swimming lessons. I was tempted to tell her I could *teach* swimming, but I didn't."

"My parents are doing a pretty good job of keeping in touch with what's important to me," I said. "Most of the time."

"But since I didn't want swimming lessons," Penny said, "she got me the pen nibs I had been asking for. So I'll be able to do calligraphy soon at home, and hopefully some illumination."

"That would be neat if you could do some illumination in the Grimoire!" I said.

"But not until I get pretty good at it. What colors are left?"

"Just brown and purple. Why don't we save them for next week, and make some more white ones today?" I suggested.

"Okay. How are we going to get new people into our Grove?"

"Carefully. We have to be sure they are the kind of people who can keep secrets, work at the training, and be patient with all the things they have to learn. AND they have to believe in God and in white magic."

"It's not going to be easy to find people like that," Penny said.

"I know. But I think they'll find us, if we learn our magic well."

Penny thought for a moment. "I think you're right."

We finished four more tall white candles, and then went to Penny's house for dinner. Her older sister was home from college, and she talked up a storm at the table.

After dinner, Penny said to me, "Hey! Why don't we go to the park and practice being in the dark?"

"Okay!"

"Mom, we're going to ride around a little while."

"Be careful."

"We will."

"Great idea!" I said as we headed into the dark. "It's nice out."

The park was actually closed at night, but it was too big to put a fence around. We stopped at my house and got cloaks, the Athame, and my boots. When we arrived at the park, we stashed our bikes deep in the woods.

“Keep your eyes open for patrol cars!” Penny said.

We didn’t go to the Grove, but just about everywhere else — the cliffs, the beach, the alder grove, the playground. Twice patrol cars came through and shined their spotlights around, but we melted into the night. There was a boy and girl kissing and smoking on the beach, but they never saw us. I was having fun and getting more comfortable with the darkness.

As we rode home, we decided we should do it once a week from then on.



The next Wednesday demonstration was the last one about swimming. After that, we would be going to a couple of schools that didn’t have pools, and just doing first aid and CPR stuff. I didn’t mind — it was getting boring because we knew the water stuff so well.

On the way home, we told Mr. Neils about our tree climbing and rope work, and how we could run through the woods during the day, and were learning to do it at night.

“How would you like to join the Search and Rescue team?” he asked. “You have so many skills you could use to help people. Often young people get into trouble in the mountains or on the water, and having more young people on the team would really help. I know the leader, and I do a lot of the training for the team.”

“What would we do?” Penny asked.

“The team meets once a month for some training and to go out for pizza or something. The first Saturday of each month. And that’s it. Until you get a rescue call, which usually comes from the Forest Service, the Sheriff’s office, or the Coast Guard. It’s unpaid, like being a volunteer fireman, but you get some free equipment and training, and a chance to make friends who can do things like you guys can.”

Penny smiled at me when he mentioned making friends. When we got back to town, he stopped by the college campus and got some pamphlets about it from his office. He said he would sponsor us, and we would almost for sure make the team.



On Saturday we made the blue wax into purple by adding red, and the red wax into brown by adding green.

"What do you think about the Search and Rescue idea?" I asked Penny as we dipped short wicks.

"It sounds like more fun than just being on a swim team or something," she said.

"Have you talked to your mom?"

"No," she admitted. "I wanted to wait and see if you could. It will be easier that way."

"I want to wait until the demos are over before I start. I want to have some time to just go to the park and play and stuff."

"I can come over for dinner and spend the night on February 1st!"

"Great! Then we can go to the Grove!"

"The wax is getting cold," Penny said.

I put it back on the stove and she cut more wicks.

That afternoon we walked to the Grove, carrying four shoe boxes brimming with candles. I brought a little garden spade to work on the fire pit and the storage hollow.

"Have you read the Bible?" Penny asked me.

"I've heard a lot of it read at Mass, but I've only read a little of it myself."

"I'd kind of like to, but my church uses the old-fashioned kind I can't understand."

"You can borrow mine. It's easy to read."

"Do you think I should read it?" she asked.

I chiseled at a hard piece of dirt in the fire pit. "Yeah. At least some of it. God has been talking to people and helping them do good magic for a long time."

"Our minister said once that magic comes from the Devil."

"If you call it miracles, that makes it okay."

I could tell Penny was thinking about that. "Is some magic from the Devil?"

"I guess black magic could be, if there is a Devil. I only want to do white magic."

"How can we tell the difference?" Penny asked. She took the spade and started working on the hollow.

I thought about it. "If it hurts anyone, it's black. Even if it doesn't hurt

anyone, but it doesn't help anyone but the magician, then it's black too — it's selfish. Or if we try to make a bunch of money or something doing it, it's black."

"I think I agree with you. What about if it breaks the laws of God?"

"That's a good one too. Let's write these in the Grimoire."

"To some people," Penny said, "if something is bad, it's all bad. Sex is bad. Magic is bad."

We both became quiet as we thought about it.

It got dark, as we had planned, before we left the Grove. We heard a cat, a frog, and saw some bats on the way out, but I wasn't scared this time . . . much.



As we drove on Wednesday, Mr. Neils told us about some of the things the Search and Rescue team had done, and about the training we would get — how to fight fires, read maps, climb rocks, and pilot a small boat. At the high school, we demonstrated basic splinting and bandaging, and of course CPR. It was a lot more relaxed than the pool demos.

On the way home I looked at Penny. "Should we?"

"Yes!"

"Mr. Neils, we'd like to join the Search and Rescue team!"

"Great. I think you'll like it," he said.

We went to his office, and he got out some application forms. They had a list of skills, and then boxes to check for how good you were. He asked us questions, and then checked **ADVANCED** for Free Climbing, Swimming, First Aid, Water Rescue, and CPR — **INTERMEDIATE** for Rope Climbing — **NONE** for Fire Fighting and Boat Handling. On Running Endurance, Penny got **ADVANCED** and I got **INTERMEDIATE**. Then he signed them as our sponsor and took us home.

"Have your parents sign them, give them to me next week and I'll deliver them personally to the team leader, with my recommendation."

"Thanks!"

"Bye!"



Chapter 19

Candlemas eve was clear and cold, with millions of stars sparkling in the sky. Once in the woods, we slipped on our blue cloaks and made our way silently toward the Guardian Hedge, as we had come to call the ring of thorn bushes. It was going to be our first ceremony in our special place that no one else knew about.

We climbed the low hill crowned with cedars and entered the Grove without speaking. Sitting in the place where the Magic Circle would someday be, we let ourselves see and hear the sights and sounds of the night. There was no moon in the sky, and no wind. Just the snaps and creaks of the woods settling in for the night, and a few scattered animal sounds.

We rose and went quietly to the fire pit. By Penny's little flashlight, I laid tinder in a protected corner and struck sparks. A flame was born, then a candle lit and carried to the middle of the Magic Circle clearing. Six more tall candles we set around the clearing on logs or rocks.

Returning to the center, one on each side of the main candle, with arms stretched out to each other and hands clasped, Penny said, "We dedicate this Grove to the work of God and his Spirits. We are your Wood Sprites who seek only to do white magic that is pleasing to you."

Sitting down on each side of the candle, we gazed at its flame.

Silently I prayed for the wisdom to know the right people for the Grove. I let several long minutes pass, then I said, "God, please hear our prayers."

We laid out all the new candles on the forest floor within the circle of light.

"God, please bless these white candles, that they may bring your blessings to many people," I said.

"God, please bless these pink candles, that they may bring love and affection to many people," Penny said.

All of the candles were blessed, red for passion and vitality, yellow for intelligence, green for prosperity and fertility, blue for healing and peace, brown for the animals, and purple for magic.

We gathered the candles and put them back in the hollow under the cedar tree. Penny got out cookies and we sat down.

I said, "God and Spirits, we don't know if what we are doing is right, but we want to be your children in a way that is fun for us, because we believe you want people to be happy. When we eat these cookies, we will try to remember Jesus and Moses, and all the other good people who have ever lived."

Just then something small flew into the circle of candlelight. A butterfly alighted on the cookies in front of Penny. "I didn't know butterflies were out this time of year," she said.

"They aren't," I said, smiling. It flew away. Penny smiled at me with a look of wonder on her face. We ate our cookies without breaking the silence.

Cookies gone, we stood up and Penny said, "Thank you, Grove, for letting us be here tonight and feel your magic."

We blew out the six candles around the clearing, then the one in the middle, put them all away, and went home to our beds.



Chapter 20

We gave the Search and Rescue applications to our parents Tuesday evening. My parents were on the phone to Penny's mom for hours. I'm not sure who was trying to convince whom, but they finally decided it would be good for us to channel our boundless energies in a useful direction. At nearly midnight, my mom and dad signed the form.

We gave them to Mr. Neils on Wednesday, and promised to do a swimming demo for him in May.

Late Thursday afternoon, the Search and Rescue leader called. His name was Jack. He talked to me first, and asked me more about my skills and why I wanted to be on the team. He said he would help arrange my transportation, but in all other ways I would be treated like an adult member of the team. Then he talked to my parents and answered some of their questions. He arranged to pick us up on Saturday for the monthly training meeting.

Saturday morning Penny and I were bouncing off the walls, so Mom kicked us out of the house. We ran three miles together, then just wandered around until lunchtime.

Finally at 1:00 Jack arrived. He had a large pickup truck with a canopy on the back and all kinds of camping and climbing gear. "I've never had anybody as young as you two on the team. Eleven and how old?"

"Nine," Penny said.

"You look older than that, probably because you're so tall. You know the team is mostly adults. And they'll tend to think you can't do anything, or even

if they know you can, they'll want to protect you."

"We don't need or want protection. We want to be treated like everyone else," I said.

"Okay. I'll try to help with that, but you have to prove yourselves worthy of that adult treatment, both in skills and in just cooperating with the team. And often that'll mean others more experienced or stronger will have to do a job."

"Oh, we know that!" Penny said.

"What's the training today?" I asked.

"A guy from the Fire Department is going to tell us about getting people out of crashed airplanes. Sound interesting?"

"Kind of," I said. "Do airplanes crash around here a lot?"

"Oh, once a year or so. We'll take some time to introduce you to everybody today, too."

We arrived at a house and went inside. We were about the first ones, but people started arriving soon. There were about 15 people in all. Everyone found places to perch in the living room.

"We have a couple of new candidates for the team," Jack said. "Since the Fire Department isn't here yet, we'll go ahead with introductions. Let's just be glad we hadn't called them to a fire!" Everyone laughed.

Jack turned to us. "After everyone introduces themselves, you two will go, and there might be questions. Then we'll vote to see if you're on the team as trial members. After about a year, the team will vote again for you to become permanent members, at which time you'll get your Search and Rescue receivers."

"What are they?" Penny asked.

"They're radio receivers that respond to a special frequency that only Central Dispatch can use. They're for getting in touch with us fast, or when other lines of communication are out."

They started going around the room.

"I'm Sam, and I'm a carpenter. On the team I specialize in water rescue. I can also drink more beer than anyone here!" Laughter.

"I'm Jeff, and you guys might steal my position as youngest member of the team. I'm 16. I'm good at packing, fire fighting, and rock climbing."

"I'm Mabel," a lady of about 40 said. "I'm not 16." Laughter. "I specialize

in coordinating supplies, and I'm also a damn good swimming rescuer."

They continued around, and Jack went last. "I'm Jack, and if we're on a rescue and you do something dumb, I'll tell you so bluntly you'll call me Jackass!" Laughter. "I do communications, coordination with the gov'ment, and just about everything else."

It was our turn. I looked at Penny.

"I'm Ariel. I'm 11. I'm not really sure what to say."

"Go down the list on the application, and tell us what you can do," Jack said, handing me one.

"Okay. Swimming. I can swim more than 2 miles now, and I'm used to cold water like the inlet or a lake. I'm going to do the four miles across the inlet this summer with Penny. I know water rescue, and I've done it in a real situation once already. I know CPR for a drowning person. How's that?" I looked at Jack.

"Fine! Keep going!"

"Free climbing. I haven't done much rock climbing, but I'm good in trees. I can climb up a maple as high as the branches will take me, and I've climbed 50 feet straight up an alder."

"You used crampons and straps, didn't you?" the 16 year old guy asked.

"No. That was just free climbing, hands and feet. I don't know much about equipment yet, but I'd like to learn." I told them about the other stuff I could do, and they asked me a few more questions. Then Penny went.

"I'm Penny, and I'm nine."

"Come on! Isn't this getting kind of ridiculous?" the teenage guy said.

He was instantly on my black-list for attacking Penny.

"Let's hear what she can do. She comes highly recommended by Tom Neils," Jack said.

Penny told them about all the thing we did. Jeff stayed silent, and only the others asked her questions. They voted on pieces of paper, and Jack collected the votes.

"Well, there is one NO vote for Ariel, and two NO votes for Penny. Would the nay-sayers please express their reservations?"

"I just can't believe they can do all that stuff," Jeff said.

"Mr. Neils checked the boxes on our application forms, we didn't," I said

with a very straight face.

"And we'd be glad to show you anything," Penny said. She was looking daggers at Jeff.

"I cast the other NO vote for Penny," a lady said. "Ariel, I can see, but nine years old is just too young. She just won't have the endurance."

"Penny says she can run 6 miles. How far can you run, Maxine?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, yeah," Maxine said.

"I've *seen* Penny run 6 miles," I said, "which is 2 more than I can. And . . . we only come together."

Everyone looked at me.

"You are loyal to each other, as it should be," Jack said. "It seems to me that the reservations expressed are all based on proof of stated abilities. Isn't that the purpose of the trial membership period?" He looked at Maxine, then at Jeff.

They nodded.

"Ariel and Penny, you are now trial members of the County Search and Rescue team. Welcome!"

Everyone clapped.

"I want to say that I will expect *completely* adult behavior by these two, and *equally* adult behavior from anyone who has doubts about them."

"Jack is hard-nosed, but he's fair," a man said.

The doorbell rang. A guy from the Fire Department was led in, carrying cases full of charts and equipment. He showed us diagrams of different airplanes, and pointed out where the doors and escape hatches were, where fires usually broke out when the planes crashed, and things like that. Then he showed us some special tools the department had just bought — super-lightweight crowbars and hydraulic jacks and stuff.

After he left, one of the guys showed some slides of a recent rock climbing trip. I was looking forward to learning more about climbing with ropes.

Then we all went out for fried chicken, and people told hunting, fishing, and climbing stories. We mostly listened, but at one point Mabel asked Penny what the funniest thing that ever happened to her was. Penny told the story of the swimming race at our first demo with Mr. Neils, and everyone listened.

They loved it, and I think even Jeff was starting to thaw toward us.



Penny faithfully studied the Tarot, and every week she started a new page in the Grimoire about one of the astrological symbols, which was also about one of the Tarot cards.



**strong, vital body
dignified manner
self-esteem, pride
considerate, kindly
rulership
fond of praise
herbs - helianthus, gallardia**

**XXI The Adept
skill, success**

**number 21
letter B
metal Gold
color Orange**

Since we weren't doing demos anymore, we started swimming again, mostly in the pool, but sometimes in the inlet. We continued our night-time romps about once a week, and one Saturday we combined the two and went swimming in the inlet after dark. It was spooky at first, but the flashing light on the channel buoy helped.

At the Search and Rescue meeting in early March, we went out on a Coast Guard boat and practiced putting out pretend fires on the boat. Jack made all us females and Jeff practice with the fire extinguishers, so we would know how hard they kicked. Then we did some swimming rescues, and Jack made sure that Penny and I had to rescue the heaviest men on the team.

"How'd she do?" Jack asked Sam after Penny brought him in.

"I made it as hard as I could without actually fighting her, and she saved me, fair and square."



Spring started to show herself in late March, and at the April meeting we went to a rock cliff and started to learn about climbing with ropes. Several other people on the team were new at ropes too, so we weren't alone. Jeff almost peed his pants when he saw me climb 50 feet straight up a rope hand-over-hand without stopping.

Penny and I started to prepare for Beltane. I gathered rocks for the Magic Circle — not just any rocks, they had to be rounded but kind of long, and they had to look nice. Penny asked her mom's boyfriend to help her make an altar, but he just thought it was a little play table or something. Penny and I had worked it all out — 3 feet long, 2 feet deep, and one foot high. The top would be thick cedar and the legs stout alder poles.

I was reading some books on philosophy and enjoying the springtime, but I was restless too. Something was missing.



Chapter 21

A couple of days after spring vacation ended, I was heading toward the school library at lunchtime when I noticed a boy sitting all alone on the steps. He looked a little familiar. I tried to remember if I had ever seen him at school before. I couldn't picture him at school, but I could see him . . . swinging . . . on some rings . . . two years ago!

"Michael!"

He looked up and stared at me kind of funny for a moment. Then I could tell he was starting to remember. I joined him on the steps.

"Alice?"

"Ariel."

"That's right! You taught me to do the rings at the park!"

"Do you go to school here now?" I asked.

"We moved three blocks and I had to change schools. Pisses me off."

"That's stupid. Now you have to make new friends. What grade are you in?"

"Seventh."

"I'm in sixth. Do you still do the rings?"

"Yeah. Whenever I get a chance to go to the park."

"I have a friend named Penny, and she and I do stuff at the park all the time, like climb trees. Would you like to do it with us sometime? We put up big rope swings that are really fun!"

"I don't know. It sounds like fun, but . . . I'll come if you don't tell anybody

else, okay?"

"Oh, you think it would be sissy if you played with girls?"

"Kind of."

"Well then, go around and ask some of the guys if it would be sissy to do things with Ariel. And then if you want to, meet us at the park tomorrow after school." I went into the library, a little disgusted.



I met Penny at her house after school that day.

"It's beautiful, Penny!" The altar was all sanded on the top and sides, reddish-brown cedar and smelling so wonderful. The alder legs still had the bark on them.

"Don't touch it yet. He still wants to put several coats of varnish on it," she said.

"I met a guy at school . . ."

"Really? Is he cute?"

"Yeah, but he's afraid people will call him a sissy if he plays with girls. I taught him how to do the rings two years ago, and then I didn't see him again until today. I invited him to join us at the park tomorrow."

"Do you think he's the kind we want to join the Grove?"

"I don't know yet. Let's just do things with him for a while, *if* he comes."

We did homework together, I stayed for dinner, and we watched some TV. I kept wondering if maybe Michael could be the next Sprite.



The next day after school, we walked to the park. Penny carried the rope and I picked up two Magic Circle rocks on the way. When we got to the playground, Michael was there, swinging back and forth across the rings.

"Hi," I said when he dropped down.

"I asked around, like you said. I learned it's not sissy doing things with Ariel — it's *dangerous!*"

"Then why'd you come?"

"I thought it would be kind of fun, as long as you don't get me killed."

"This is Penny, my best friend. Would you like to swing with us?"

"Okay."

We picked out a nice maple. Michael looked up at it and said, "Oh my

God.”

Penny climbed it like a spider, let down the rope about 60 feet and made it fast.

“We’ve swung in this tree before. It’s a nice one. You can almost touch that other tree over there when you fly,” I said while Penny brought up the rope.

“Ariel, since you met Michael, you get to show him how to fly.”

“Okay.” I coiled the puller rope and flew. Out at the far end of the flight, my hand came within inches of the other tree. Then I did acrobatics as I swished back and forth through the air. Bringing the rope back up, I said, “Michael?”

“I have *never* seen a swing that neat! Here I go . . .” He reached for the rope.

I stopped him. “If you’re going to do things with us, you have to learn how to do them right and safely, okay?”

“Okay . . .”

“The most important thing is your hands. Right, Penny?”

“Yep!”

“Grab high on the rope and trust your hands. You might get one foot in the loop before you go, but sometimes you can’t. Trust your hands and worry about your feet later.”

“Like this?”

“Yeah. Go for it!”

“Whoopee!” Michael shouted as he flew into the air.

Penny and I watched him swing. He looked like he was having fun. We had to coach him for the drop-off, and remind him to bring the puller rope up with him.

“Was that sissy?” Penny asked him. Before he could answer, she was in the air.

“Can you really swim faster than anyone else around?” he asked as we watched Penny fly.

“Penny’s the fastest. Some of her times are very close to the world’s record.”

“What else do you guys do?”

I told him about alder climbing, and swimming in the inlet. Penny returned, and I talked about running in the woods, day and night.

"Would you like to do stuff with us? We would teach you," I said.

"Gosh. I don't know. You guys are so much better than me . . ."

"And we'll stay better unless you let us teach you!" Penny said.

"Hmm. Okay, if you promise not to laugh at me, and never blab at school what I can and can't do."

"Of course," I said. "We believe in keeping secrets for friends, but I don't want to feel like you're ashamed of us. If I'm going to be your friend, I don't want you to pretend not to know me at school or something."

"Okay."

"And you have to learn from Penny, too. She's the swimming and running teacher. I learn from *her*."

"I guess so. You're nine?"

She nodded.

"You look the same age as Ariel."

"I wish."

We all swung again, and then I climbed the 60 feet up the rope without stopping.

"Will I learn to do that?" I heard Michael ask Penny.

"Yep," she told him.



I think Michael really wanted to be our friend. He started walking home from school and meeting Penny with me almost everyday. He saw us climb alders, and we started teaching him maple climbing and rope work. When we would all run together, he would get tired after a mile just like Penny and I did at first. "How far can you guys run, anyway?"

We told him. He looked hurt, so we both put our arms around him and I said, "If you will be our friend and our brother, then we will teach you and help you until you are as strong as we are, or stronger." That made him feel good.

Penny and I had to take a couple of days to ourselves to get ready for Beltane. I had rocks stashed at school, at home, and in empty lots, and all of them had to go to the Grove. We had to collect lots of firewood. And then

there was the altar — it took both of us to carry it, and it was heavy! Getting it through the Guardian Hedge was the hardest part, but after almost an hour of pushing and pulling, we did it. I measured a string four and a half feet long with a loop on one end, stuck a stick in the center of the Magic Circle clearing, and marked out a nine foot circle. Then I set the stones in the ground so they were firmly rooted, but still sticking up about 6 inches.

Just a few days before Beltane, I learned that we had a special spell to cast. Penny's mom wasn't happy all the time, and she had decided to try gardening so she would feel better and get some extra food, too. She had bought a whole bunch of garden seeds, and Penny asked if we could do some magic to help the seeds grow and to help her mom be happy.

"Sounds good to me!" I said. "We'll be helping someone, and it's perfect for Beltane, the time to bless the fields and the cattle."

Penny asked if I would be the one to do it, and I agreed.



Chapter 22

We entered the Grove silently and sat in the dark by the fire pit. I felt excited about all the things we were going to do, but I tried to relax.

Penny kindled a fire, and I built it up with the twigs and sticks we had collected. "I have the map," Penny said. "Build me a nice bonfire, but don't be surprised if it takes me an hour to cover all those roads!" She crept away into the darkness.

I had lots of time to think while Penny was gone checking to see if our fire was visible. All I had to do was keep the flames leaping, and I had a huge pile of wood ready. I thought about Penny's mom, wanting to grow a garden. I wondered if she might get married to her boyfriend someday. He sure made us a beautiful altar, even though he didn't know it. We should give him a gift in return — maybe some calligraphy or a fancy candle or something.

I put more large sticks in the fire. Did I want a boyfriend? I wasn't sure. Michael seemed nice. I just wasn't sure.

I was glad we joined Search and Rescue. That first meeting had been kind of tense, wondering if they were going to accept us or laugh us out of the house. We were automatically on D team, the support people, and we would work with Mabel on rescues until we were permanent members. That would be strange having radio receivers that could go off at any time, day or night, to call us to a rescue.

I opened the bag Penny brought and looked through all the seed packets.

Gardening would be fun to learn someday. Maybe her mom would teach us after she gets good at it.

More wood on the fire. I looked through our Grimoire — there was getting to be lots of stuff in it. I thought of a couple of things I wanted to add, like a history of all our Wood Sprite ceremonies and magic.

“Hi!”

I jumped into the shadows and pulled out my knife in one quick leap. “Penny!” I relaxed and went back to the fire.

“I’d hate to meet *you* in a dark alley!”

“I didn’t hear a thing! You’re really quiet,” I said.

“You’re just as quiet. You’ve just never snuck up on anybody yet.”

“I guess we’ll have to learn to listen, too! Did you see it?”

“Not a flicker, all the way around!” she said.

“Great! I’ve always felt really safe here.”

A minute later, we both stepped into the Magic Circle, each carrying a lighted white candle. I said, “We dedicate this Grove to God and his Spirits, as a safe place for Wood Sprites to do white magic. All good spirits are welcome here.” We set the candles on the altar and sat on the ground in front of it. My prayers were about Michael, that he would be a good friend and want to join the Grove. “God, please hear our prayers.”

I brought a small blue candle out of my pocket and set it on the altar. “Spirits, we Wood Sprites have a special request on this Beltane eve. Penny’s mom is trying to be happy, and we offer this flame . . .” I lit the candle from an altar candle. “. . . hoping you will do what you can, and please help us to know what we can do to help her be happy.”

I brought out a green candle. Penny set the packets of seeds on the altar, then I said, “Spirits, we offer this flame for the fertility of these seeds, hoping you will watch over the garden they will grow in, and help the one who tends them to grow in knowledge and wisdom.”

Both the blue and the green candles were now glowing on the altar. I pulled out the Athame and laid it in front of them. “Spirits, I offer this blade of steel as Guardian of these spells, that it will bring good things if this magic is right, and that it will cut me if this magic is wrong.”

Penny looked at me strangely with her mouth open. I hadn’t told her I was

going to do that part.

When she had recovered from her momentary shock, she took out a dinner roll and said, "God, as we share this simple meal of bread grown in your fields, we will remember all the farmers and ranchers who have grown food, and we ask you to please help them wherever they are." She broke the bread and gave me half. I chewed in silence, thinking of a farmer on a tractor. The image faded, and then I saw a farmer driving a plow pulled by oxen. Then I saw a farmer with just a hand hoe, working in his field.

We blew out the little candles and cleared off the altar. I said, "Thank you, Grove, for letting us celebrate and do magic here tonight. And thank you for hiding our Beltane fire from the eyes of the world." We picked up the tall candles and went back to the fire pit to roast marshmallows over the coals.



Chapter 23

"I could hardly believe it!" Penny's mom told us about a week later when we were out talking to her as she worked on her new garden. "I thought this dirt was really poor, and then I came out to get it ready for planting and all of a sudden it's teeming with earthworms! The carrots are here, maybe, and this row will be radishes, I hope, and over there are going to be squash, if I'm lucky. Today I'm planting spinach in this shady spot."

Penny asked me later, "Do you think our magic is really working?"

"It's God's magic, remember?" I said with a proud smirk on my face. "Us sprites are just helping out a little."

"That thing you did with the Athame on the altar scared me. It sounded dangerous," she said.

"It wasn't. What would have been dangerous is if I had tried to do magic without being sincere about it."

"Jeez, I have more to learn about it than I thought. Would you teach me more of this kind of stuff?"

"I am," I said.



At the June meeting, we got our Search and Rescue packs. They were bright orange. Mabel helped us adjust them to our size and told us what everything was — tube tent, bivouac sack, 100 feet of light rope, rain gear, folding shovel, hatchet, hunting knife, county map, compass . . .

"This is your signal kit, which you will learn how to use today. We replace

them every two years even if they haven't been used. See this expiration date?"

"Yes."

"Emergency food, replaced yearly. Water bottle — keep it full. Stove and pot — new gas cartridge after any use. First aid kit — replaced every two years. Flashlight — extra bulb inside, and the batteries are replaced yearly, sooner if used much."

Then she showed us the list of stuff we had to supply ourselves and keep ready all the time — boots, socks, jeans, and all that. "And remember, you can't use *any* search and rescue gear for other activities. It has to sit in your rooms, packed and ready to go, until needed."

The rest of the team finished their business meeting, and we drove to the Fire Department's practice field. Using out-of-date signal kits, Penny and I and a couple of other fairly new people learned how to shoot sky flares, set off smoke cartridges, and use signal mirrors.

"Wow!" Penny said as she pulled the chain and her flare rocketed for the sky. "How high do they go?"

"About a thousand feet," Jack told us. He made Jeff practice too.

Then a couple of guys who used to be Forest Service firefighters talked about fighting brushfires, and not getting caught by the fire. They lit some dry bushes on fire, and we all practiced putting them out with shovels, hatchets, and lots of dirt.

"Now remember, we aren't firefighters, but sometimes we have to go into or pass through a burned area to get to a rescue scene. Let the firefighters do the firefighting unless you are forced to by circumstances."

We burned some more bushes and then went out for Chinese food.



We were getting to be good friends with Michael. By the time school got out and Penny turned 10, he could run two miles, climb maples pretty well, put up a swing, and climb down the rope. Penny had taught him to float, and he could swim eight or ten laps in the pool.

He wasn't learning stuff as fast as we had, and I wondered about it for a while, until one day at the pool Penny made me realize why.

"How can you swim 100 or more laps?" he asked.

"We just use a lot less energy than you do. You've got more body to move than we do," she said.

"Michael," I said from the edge of the pool, "it's because we started training before we became adolescents. Your body is almost all grown up, so it will take a little longer for you. But if you'll stick with us, we'll stick with you."

"Okay. I'll do some more laps."

"Five strokes to the breath this time!" Penny yelled.

"Maybe it's time to find out if he can be a Sprite," I said, knowing he couldn't hear me.

"I think so too," Penny said.

After swimming we went down to the boardwalk by the harbor. Hardly anyone was there.

"Do you believe in God, Michael?" I asked as we leaned on the rail and looked at boats.

"I don't know. I think so, but when I go to church . . . I don't know."

"If there is a God, what's he . . . or she . . . like?" Penny asked.

"He'd have to be great, and powerful, and kind. He'd have to really like people or he wouldn't have made them."

I looked at Penny. "What about the Devil?" I asked.

"I guess the Devil does bad things and God does good things."

"Do you think that God does good things all by himself?" Penny asked.

"Umm . . . no. He has angels, and good people, doesn't he?"

"Michael, we want to ask you something," I began, "but you have to promise not to tell anyone, ever, no matter what you decide."

"Okay . . . I promise."

I looked at Penny. I was scared. It was a big risk, but how else could we find new people? "Michael, the things you have been doing with us are the very beginning of training to become a Wood Sprite, and the most important thing that Wood Sprites do is work white magic. I'm not talking about trick magic, with rabbits and scarves and junk. I'm talking about real magic. White magic is magic that God and his Spirits like. It helps people, and never hurts anyone. But it is powerful, and it takes a lot of training and study to learn. We think you might make a good Wood Sprite, but only you can decide

if you want to try or not.”

We were all silent for a long time.

“Somehow, I knew there was something special about you guys. But I never would have guessed what,” he said.

“You still promise to keep our secret?” Penny demanded.

“Yeah. Do you mean magic like in medieval fantasy movies and Dungeons and Dragons and stuff?”

“Ummm . . . mostly no,” I said. “Most of that’s just movie special effects. White magic helps someone other than the magician, it doesn’t accept payment or reward, and it follows the laws of God. We’ve only told you because it sounds like you already sort of believe in God.”

He didn’t say anything for a while.

“Can I think about it? You won’t cast a spell on me or anything, will you?”

“Of course not!” I said. “That would be black magic.”

“And no black magic or evil or selfishness is allowed anywhere near our Magic Circle!” Penny said. “Remember that as you think about it.”

More silence.

Finally I said, “We’re going swimming in the inlet tomorrow. If you want to go with us, ride your bike to the park about 9:00. We’ll ride out to a nice little beach.”



Michael did come swimming, and continued the other training too, but no one said anything more about magic when we were together. We were glad he was still training, and he seemed to be keeping our secrets.

Penny and I had other work to do. Penny continued her study of the Tarot cards and astrology, writing in the Grimoire when she had her notes together. I was studying American Indian religion, especially about the Vision Quest.

We were preparing for our own Vision Quests, two days and one night alone, with no food or equipment. We had talked our parents into letting us take a couple of overnight bicycle trips to the campground at the State Park, but on each trip one of us would be at the Grove instead. We agreed that the person who went to the State Park was in the most danger. I planned to do mine on my birthday in August, and Penny would do hers a week later.

But first would come the ancient holiday of Lughnasad, now called

Lammas, the celebration of the first fruits of the harvest. We were at my house one day in July, thinking about what we should do for it, when the phone rang. It was Mabel.

"We have a helicopter down in the hills. I'll be by in one minute, A and B teams are already on their way."

"Penny is here with me."

"Okay. We'll run by her place for gear."

In those 60 seconds, I changed into hiking clothes, Penny grabbed my pack, and Mom threw some food into a bag for us. Mabel's truck roared up and we hopped in, flew to Penny's house to grab her stuff, then Penny changed in the cab on the way.

"Watch and learn," Mabel said, then picked up the microphone of her two-way radio as we headed out of town. "Search and Rescue Delta team to Dispatch. Have they decided where they're going in?"

"Delta team, your people are arriving now at the Bear Creek trailhead."

"Dispatch, any fire involved in the crash?"

"Delta team, negative on that, so far. The chopper's down in dense forest. They'll have to get in and out on the ground."

"Search and Rescue Delta team out."

Mabel roared on down the highway. She explained to us how we would wait at the trailhead, and if they needed anything else, we'd have to pack it in. Or if they had to come out of the woods at a different point, we'd drive around and meet them.

We arrived at the end of a dead-end road. There was a medic truck there already, a Sheriff's car, and several of the Search and Rescue team's cars and trucks.

"Keep your packs ready in the truck," she told us, then ran over to talk to the Sheriff's deputy.

We checked our packs. Mabel came back and told us the team hadn't arrived at the crash site yet. We sat on the tailgate and waited. It was hot. The medic came over to chat with Mabel.

"I didn't know you guys brought your kids."

"We don't," Mabel said. "Only highly-trained Search and Rescue people, and you're looking at a couple of them."

He didn't say anything else about us as they talked. Mabel kept one ear on the radio.

"Search and Rescue Baker team to Dispatch. The chopper is lodged in some trees. I think we can get to it, but have the climbers on Delta team stand by."

"Dispatch to Delta team."

"Search and Rescue Delta. We copy. Climbers standing by." Then she hopped in the back of the truck and started strapping 100 foot climbing ropes to all 3 packs. "You guys hear that? They might need you."

We waited. Flies buzzed around. We munched on some of our food.

"Search and Rescue Baker team to Dispatch. We have a dead adult female and a conscious adult male with disorientation and a probable concussion. No spinal injuries. We're getting him out of the chopper now. Climbers on Delta can relax."

I felt both relief and disappointment, and I think Penny did too. About an hour later they brought the conscious man out of the woods and gave him to the medics. A couple of the rescue team people were scraped up a little, and the medics tended to them, also. Mabel brought out water and lemonade and snacks for everybody. After things had settled down, Jack came over to us.

"As you can see, there's often a lot of waiting in rescue work. It was a mess in there — broken branches everywhere. I'm glad we didn't need you, but I'm also glad you were here."



Chapter 24

“Lammas used to be Loaf Mass, and people would bless the first loaf of bread made from the new harvest.”

“We don’t have any newly-grown wheat,” Penny said, “but we have lots of vegetables!”

“And my mom has lots of flowers!”

We got some wicker baskets and thought of all the freshly-grown foods and flowers we could get. We decided to make it a daytime celebration, and since it was on the same day as Search and Rescue, we would do it in the morning.

We asked everybody days before — Penny’s mom, my mom, and some neighbors — and Penny spent the night on August 1st. Then as soon as dawn was in the sky, we were dressed, put our cloaks and stuff into daypacks, and took our baskets to the gardens.

“Just one of each thing, right?”

“Except strawberries. They said we could pick a whole basket. That’ll be our breakfast!”

In one basket we had all kinds of flowers, and in the other one, all the different vegetables — zucchini squash, carrot, beet, radish, spinach leaves, green onion, kohlrabi, and of course strawberries. The squash, roots, and kohlrabi were small, but we could tell what they would become. By sunrise we were walking to the park with our baskets.

The Grove was beautiful in a way I had never seen it before. It was partly

open to the sky on the east side, and the morning sun came streaming in as it climbed higher. Once in our cloaks, we stepped into the Magic Circle with our baskets and set them on each side of the altar.

Penny dedicated the Grove, but instead of going right to our silent prayer time, she said, "Let's have a teaching time, where one of us can give a lesson about something we've learned. We're going to have more people to train soon, I bet. Could we?"

"Okay. Have any ideas for our first lesson?"

"Would you teach me more about that thing you did with the Athame last time?" she said.

"I'll try. Let me see. I read somewhere that you have to have faith to have a miracle. A miracle is the same thing as white magic, and faith is believing in what you are doing, trusting yourself and God. That really made sense to me. How can we do white magic unless we really believe in God and his Spirits? The power for white magic comes from them. And they even make the final decision about it. You and me are just making a request and being a channel."

"So if some magic we did didn't work . . . ?"

"It could be because we didn't have faith in what we were doing, or the Spirits didn't agree it was the right thing to do. I read that God only wants people in Heaven who are capable of very positive thinking. So whether we're doing white magic or gardening or bricklaying, God wants us to do it with faith and love, because that's how we learn positive thinking!"

"That makes sense. What about the Athame?"

"It's a symbol of the power of the Spirits. It can do many useful things, but if used wrong, it can hurt the one who is using it. When I offered it to guard the spells, it was like saying I had faith my magic was white, but if it really was black, I would take my punishment."

"But it was almost like you offered your life, Ariel!"

"That's right. If we can't offer our lives for something, then we must not have much faith in it."

"Jeez."

We both fell silent and had our prayer time. God, I sure hope the things I'm teaching Penny are right. It's sure a big responsibility. What if I'm wrong? I don't want to be afraid to teach people, God. Please help me to

teach people the right things. "God, please hear our prayers."

Then we thanked the Spirits for all the fruits of the harvest. I took flowers out of the flower basket one at a time, handed them to Penny, and she set them on the altar. She took vegetables out and I set them on the altar. We asked for a special blessing for the strawberries, set the biggest one on the altar, and shared the next biggest one.

Over at the fire pit, we ate the rest of the strawberries, and Penny said, "What should we do with all the stuff on the altar?"

I looked over at it. All the different colors of flowers and veggies sure were beautiful, but it wouldn't be right to just let them rot on the altar. "We should give them to someone."

"How about the poor people who live in that little house on the Carter Road?"

"Okay!"

We talked about Michael for a while. We agreed he was trying hard at all the training. Penny thought he liked me. I thought he would make a good Sprite, but I didn't want to show him where the Grove was until he had decided and signed the Pact and learned some things about magic. Penny agreed.

We thanked the Grove and left the basket of food and flowers at the little house as we walked home.



At the Search and Rescue meeting, Penny and I got to hear about everything that had happened at the crashed helicopter. Jack and the assistant leader went over every detail, and pointed out several things that could have been done better. They did it in a way that didn't make anyone feel guilty or angry. It really was a team, and I was proud to be part of it.

We went out to the rocks again. Penny and I were getting pretty good at belaying and rappelling. We even practiced climbing with packs on. At dinner, Jack gave all the permanent members new rechargeable batteries for their Search and Rescue receivers.



Chapter 25

Just about every thought and feeling I could imagine went through my head those last few days before my Vision Quest. I didn't talk much. I tried to keep busy with physical stuff, but still I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to be alone for all that time.

We were with Michael about four days before my birthday, and after we did some running and tree climbing and had lunch together, I decided I needed to tell him something.

"Michael, Penny and I are preparing for something that is very special and personal to us, and has to do with magic. It will take us a while to get ready, and do it, and recover from it, so we won't be able to train with you for about . . . two weeks. I hope you understand."

"I'll miss you guys. Can you tell me what it is?"

"No. Someday I hope we can. We'll meet you at the swimming inlet two weeks from today, okay?"

"I suppose. See you guys!"



I insisted we take the candles home. I didn't want any unnecessary temptations.. We decided the person on her Quest would have to stay inside the Guardian Hedge. And she wouldn't even have a fire-making pouch.

I tried not to act strange those last couple of days. I didn't want my parents to think I was sick or flipping out or something, and cancel the camping trips. But I was carrying around this terrible and wonderful feeling

that the Ariel who went into that Grove wouldn't come out, and whoever . . . or whatever . . . came out would be different.

The day before my birthday, Penny and I got all our camping gear together. Only half of it would be used, but the trip had to look good. My mom kept asking if I needed another flashlight, or some extra food, or new clothes. I just had to tell her that if I took all that, I couldn't even pedal my bicycle!

The night before the Quest, I didn't sleep much. I read part of a book, and reread some of my notes about Vision Quests. Then I just lay awake and thought about Penny, and how good a friend she was, through all the training and all the learning. Then I think I finally fell asleep.



Penny was knocking on the door at the crack of dawn. Mom let her in.

"Wake up, sleepy! I can't wait to go swimming in that lake!"

"Ha, ha," I said.

Mom made us a big breakfast. I think she thought we were going to starve otherwise. I did a pretty good job of hiding my real feelings. I figured I would have plenty of time to think about them soon enough.

By 8:00 in the morning we were at the park. Dew was still on the grass. No one else was there. I felt lonelier than I could ever remember feeling.

"Penny, what happens if I hear people in the park playing and eating and stuff?"

She didn't say anything. Penny is a wise person.

"Stash my bike *after* I go in. One less temptation."

"Okay. See you tomorrow at sunset. Ten minutes after sunset I come in and get you, do CPR, whatever."

I took my cloak out of my daypack on my bike. That was all I got. I checked the pockets, tossed Penny my fire pouch. I checked my coat and pants pockets.

"A nickel. I don't suppose I could do much with *that* in the Grove. But here. I don't even want to *think* about what I could do with it!"

"Bye!" Penny said.

I waved, turned, and headed into the woods.



The Grove was like it always was. Just no candles. But it was very different too, knowing I was alone, and would be alone for a long time. I looked around me. Trees, bushes, firewood pile, fire pit. I didn't have anything to make fire with, and even if I did, I had promised not to. I checked all my pockets again just in case . . . a fir needle.

The Magic Circle and the altar. We had decided the person on her Quest shouldn't enter the Circle or try to do magic. I looked in the storage hollow. Tree roots and dirt. So I just sat down for a while and thought. Why am I doing this? It's my 12th birthday. I could be having a party. But I can still have a party . . . tomorrow night. I want to do this Vision Quest first.

I decided to count trees. There didn't seem to be cedars anywhere on the hill but right at the Grove. It was hard to keep track of which ones I had already counted, but I'm pretty sure I got it right — 7 cedars.

I sat down, chin in my hands. The sun was getting a little higher. Michael is nice. I wonder if he really does like me. I don't think it really matters unless he joins the Grove. There's a guy at school I think is really cute, but I don't think he would ever like me.

I walked around some more, this time down off the hill. Maples and alders, mostly. I came to the Guardian Hedge, and started walking all the way around the Grove, just inside the thorny bushes. I'm really lucky to be able to do this. Most people my age wouldn't be allowed to even go camping. I guess my parents trust me. My mom didn't used to, but then she saw I wasn't getting into any trouble, even though I was doing weird stuff, and decided to start trusting me, I guess.

I kept wandering around through the ferns and bushes. I think I had gone all the way around the Hedge. I didn't really know. I didn't really care. I knew it went all the way around. I just let my feet guide me, over logs, between trees. I was getting bored. I wanted something to do. It must be about noon. There's nothing to do here. I sat on a log and watched an ant walk around. Boring. I tried to count alders. Boring. Too many of them, anyway.

I must have poked around in the woods for another hour. Nothing interesting. No old logging machinery, like we often found out in the woods. Not even any trash to look at! I finally wandered back up to the Grove. I tried

to imagine what it would be like if we had six or eight people in the Grove. Tents set up on the flat places on the west side. Food cooking at the fire pit. Prayers and magic in the Magic Circle. Singing! Dancing maybe even! It would be neat.

But there's no one here today. No one to talk to. I haven't had many friends in my life. Not good friends. I was accepted by everyone, until I made friends with Penny. Since then I've been a loner at school, reading books in the library, running around the field alone. Right now, I could be the only person in the world. Maybe I've gone back in time, and it's uninhabited wilderness out there, from sea to shining sea. Maybe the world ends right outside the Hedge. Maybe Penny will never come back. I sat there and just felt alone for a long time. It was almost comfortable, being the only person in the world. But I started crying . . .



I woke up with sore eyes. I must have fallen asleep crying. The sun was almost setting. Sunset! I could leave at sunset!

But wait. I was supposed to stay all night. I haven't had a night here yet. It must be sunset *tomorrow* I'm supposed to come out. That's stupid! I'm free to do anything I want, and I want to go home and eat dinner. No one can keep me here! I'm hungry. I want a pizza for dinner. A whole pizza. Just mine.

I ran down the hill and through the woods. I want to go home! There in front of me was the Guardian Hedge. I fell on my knees in front of it and cried. It was my idea to come here. I had studied all about the Vision Quest, not Penny. I just cried for a long time, not knowing what else to do.

Through my tears I could see sunset colors in the sky. Orange, pink, and blue. I wiped my tears away and looked around. Night was coming, a night I had planned to spend alone. I looked up at the Hedge.

"You're free to go," a tiny whisper of a voice somewhere inside me said.

"I'm staying!" I yelled.

No one said anything. It was getting shadowy in the woods. That didn't bother me — I was used to the dark. "I'm staying," I said in a calmer voice, got up and walked back to the Grove.

I sat by the fire pit and thought about food. I wanted something to eat. I

remembered all the meals we had eaten here, the cookies, marshmallows, strawberries . . . I want something to eat! In the fading light I started to crawl around on my hands and knees to see if we had ever dropped anything. I found a cookie crumb. I held it in my hand for a moment, was tempted to eat it, then threw it into the woods and laughed. I laughed long and hard, at myself, at my weak body and mind.

"In physical things, let your body limit you, not your mind," I said out loud. That had helped me get through my training many times, and it was just as true now. My body wasn't hungry, only my mind. I stretched out on the cedar needles and gazed up at the fading sunset colors.

I thought about Search and Rescue. It had started with us wanting to learn first aid. Now I was halfway through my trial period on the team. In six more months, I would probably be on both B and C teams, land and water rescue. Penny too. She would be the only kid in elementary school with a radio receiver in her purse that could call her to places where firemen dared not go. And I would be the only kid in middle school.

Was it an ego trip for me? Was I being selfish? How could I call myself selfish if I would be risking my life, without any pay, to save people? "Am I doing it for the right reasons, cedar trees?" I asked the dark branches above me. They didn't say anything. It was really dark now.

I zipped up my jacket and put on my cloak. There's not even anything much to look at now. I walked over to the little clearings on the other side of the Magic Circle. They looked kind of cozy. I picked a corner next to some logs, pulled my hood on, and curled up. The thick bed of cedar needles was pretty soft. Maybe I could sleep through the night.

But I wasn't sleepy. I had already slept half the afternoon. Oh, well. What shall I think about? I wonder how Penny is doing at the State Park. She has a tent, a sleeping bag, and plenty of food. Maybe she'll meet some cute boy.

What was that? I listened, straining my ears. There it was again! I had practiced being in the dark a lot now, but always with Penny, and always moving. Now I was alone and still. I tried to remember that the woods made all kinds of creaking noises as they cooled off at night, but still I was scared. Nothing big could get through that hedge without a bulldozer or a chainsaw, I told myself, but I imagined King Kong and Godzilla anyway.

The popping and creaking noises continued. I had never worked so hard listening, straining to hear a familiar sound or a pattern of footsteps. After hours of listening I must have fallen asleep.



I woke up shivering.

It was still dark, but I could see light and shadows. Curious, I stood up. The side of my body I had lain on was sore, almost numb. I limped over to the fire pit. There in the sky was an almost-full Moon! Wow. It sure is beautiful, all white and glowing. But it was a cold kind of beauty. I was shivering. The sky was clear, and I knew that made for the coldest nights.

I sat on a cold log and listened. Silence, deathly cold silence. No snapping sounds, no animal noises. No breeze. I didn't feel alone. I had the cold Moon as my friend. I wandered around the edge of the Grove and peered out into the woods, which were only letting in tiny patches of moonlight. Stillness everywhere.

God, I'm cold! I tried to wrap my cloak tighter, but it was doing all it could. I walked and stomped around the Grove, trying to warm my legs. It didn't help much.

I couldn't sleep anymore. Sometimes I was too cold and walked around. Sometimes I just sat and thought about my 12 years of life. When I was 11, I learned first aid and rescue, and started doing magic in the Grove. When I was 10, I learned about magic and became friends with Penny. When I was 9, I was popular in school. When I was 8, I was sad most of the time because my Teacher had gone away. When I was 7, I had learned so many things from him. When I was 6, I was just a little kid. When I was 5 . . . I couldn't remember any more.

The Moon was getting lower in the sky. I tried to sleep some more, but it was too cold, so I just walked. My hands were cold, but I started reaching out and touching things — tree bark, ferns, leaves, dirt. I wandered off the hill. All these wonderful trees are here, and I don't really know them. I've never even bothered to touch most of them. I came face to face with an alder, standing tall in the still night. "You stand here, tall and proud, every night, don't you?" I wrapped my arms around the slender tree, pressed my face against it and cried. "You're beautiful, tree. So tall and strong . . . and

patient.” I held that tree for a long time. I kept feeling like it had something to tell me . . . but it could only tell me very slowly, much slower than I knew how to listen and understand.

Finally I said good-bye and started walking again. But I looked back at the tree several times. It wasn’t any different from all the rest . . . except that it had listened to me, and I knew it would keep on listening to me if I thought of more to say.

Something was different. The Moon was gone. But there was light in the sky . . . and it didn’t look like moonlight. Could it be . . . dawn? “Whoopee!” I started running through the woods, hopping over logs and bushes. “Hooray! It’s almost morning!” I ran up to the Grove and looked at the sky. Yes! It was getting lighter in the east, and the moon had set in the west. I did jumping jacks and push-ups. I wanted to be alive and strong, like the trees, to greet the Sun! I am Ariel, and I am strong and fast and quiet. And even if I’m all alone right now, I’m still Ariel!

Soon there was pink in the sky. Some clouds formed and turned orange and pink. The sky went from black to blue. I ran around the Grove, jumping from log to log. The sky was getting really bright in the east. I threw my hood back.

The Sun! Just a glint of fire through the trees. I bounced up and down and waved. “Good morning, Sun! It’s Ariel! I’m still here, and I’ve been waiting for you!”

Colors in the Grove and in the woods started to come to life. I just walked around and looked at everything, almost like I had never been here before. So many different colors! So many shades! I had been here almost 24 hours now. What shall I have for breakfast?

There was nothing. Nothing for breakfast. And I realized my mouth was dry. I could hardly swallow. I knew from rescue training that lack of water will kill you long before lack of food. I had felt hungry first, but that was just my mind talking. My dry throat was real, and I couldn’t feel any saliva anywhere in my mouth. I could go to the stream! But that was outside the Guardian Hedge.

I sat down by the fire pit. Nothing for breakfast. The sun started to warm me as it found the gap between the trees. I could feel it, but I didn’t care

anymore. I just sat there and stared out at the trees.

The day started to get warm. I was still in my cloak and I was starting to sweat. Who cares? I just sat there, feeling useless. Nothing to do, just all this stupid time to pass. Dumb. I feel really dumb. I *am* really dumb.

Finally, I was in shade again. The sun was above the cedars. I feel really dead. Maybe this is what it's like to be dead. Watch the sun go up and down. I feel really empty inside. And I'm alone.

It was getting to be afternoon. A thought started creeping into my little head. I could see myself sitting in church week after week, trying to understand the readings from the Bible, trying to understand what the priest was saying. Taking the Eucharist bread and wine and trying to feel what Jesus meant by things he said. Week after week. And now I'm sitting here in the Grove, all alone. But I'm not! Haven't I learned anything? I'm not alone! There is a God out there, and inside me too. And there are Angels, and Archangels, and Spirits of all kinds. The Holy Spirit is drawing me toward God, and the Spirit of Truth is teaching me . . .

Wow! I'm not alone. I don't have to ever feel alone! I've got Spirits and wonderful energies all around me. And trees. I'm not alone! I hopped up and pulled my cloak off. I breathed the clean air. "I'm not alone, am I?" I said out loud. I couldn't help myself — I started dancing around the Grove, singing a song from church. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness, And all these things shall be added unto you, Allelu, Alleluia."

For the first time in many hours, there was a smile on my face. I could feel it. I danced and ran around, thinking of all the Spirits. I remembered reading in one book about seven Spirits: Intuition, Understanding, Courage, Knowledge, Counsel, Worship, and Wisdom. Then I remembered something that said there were seven Archangels: Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel, and three others I couldn't remember. I wonder if they're the same. And if they are, which is which? I ran over to the fire pit and looked up at the blue sky. I wonder if I'll ever see Spirits and Angels.

"Yes, you will," a little voice somewhere inside me said.

I knelt down and started talking to the seven Spirits. "Spirit of Intuition, you are wonderful, because you help people to know things that they don't think they're supposed to know. You give people knowledge even when they

can't go to school.

"Spirit of Understanding, I love you too. You are helping me make sense out of all the stuff I read and all the stuff I hear at church and everything. Please keep helping me in the future. I have lots more to learn."

I went on, talking to all kinds of different Spirits, even the Spirits of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. Then I made up a few.

"Spirit of Trees, you are very special to me, because you let me feel a little bit like a bird when I swing, even though I don't have wings. Thank you, Spirit of Trees!"

The sun was getting low in the sky. My mouth was so dry I couldn't talk anymore, so I just spoke silently. God, Master of all Spirits, thank you for my Vision Quest. I almost want to do it for longer, but I know I need to go meet Penny, and get something to eat and drink. I think I'll come back next year, and I'll do better next time. I won't waste my time feeling sorry for myself.

I got up and walked around the Grove. I didn't want to leave. The Sun was almost setting. Good-bye, trees. I went over to the place I had slept part of the night. Thank you, logs, for comforting me. I put my cloak on and tied the green belt. I looked at the Magic Circle and its altar. I haven't even stepped inside you on my Quest, but I'm glad you're here. I'll be back soon, but not alone next time.

The sun was sinking out of sight in the trees. I waited, standing tall and proud, my hood back, the evening breeze blowing my hair. The sky took on that pinkish color, and I knew the sun had set. I did what I always did before leaving. "Thank you, Grove, for letting me do my Vision Quest here!" I strode down the hill toward the Guardian Hedge.



Chapter 26

Penny was there waiting for me. We just looked at each other for a long time.

"You *have* changed," she said.

She had my bike there, so I dug out my water bottle and drank it all. Nothing had ever tasted so good in my whole life!

We walked our bikes home. I hadn't said anything yet. Words didn't seem very important. Penny didn't speak either. But I realized that my parents would think something was wrong if I didn't talk about *something*. But it was Penny who broke the silence.

"Now that you've done it, do you still think I should?"

"I'd like to do it again next year." I knew I hadn't answered her question, but I knew she'd understand. "What did you do at the State Park?"

"Swam a lot. Sun bathed. Made some friends — one-day friends. Walked some of the trails. Kissed a boy . . ."

"You did?"

"Yeah. Another one-day friend. He wasn't from around here. But he was so cute!"

"Neat! Maybe I'll find someone next week! You going to do it?"

"The Vision Quest? Yeah. It's scary. But you lived. You even want to do it again. I guess I'll live."

When we got to my house, my parents wanted to take us out to dinner. I picked a place that had a fruit salad bar. My stomach wasn't ready for

anything else quite yet.



For the next few days, I spent lots of time alone. I wasn't ready to talk about my Vision Quest, not even with Penny. First I had to talk it over with myself and several friendly Spirits. I decided my vision had been about who I was. I wasn't nearly as tall as Penny, but standing tall and proud, like the alders, was more important to me now. And being strong. Muscles, and being strong inside when hungry and stuff like that. And being quiet. I could move quietly, even in the woods. And I could listen to people, and to books, and not open my mouth until I had something to say. And talking to the Spirits. I wanted to talk to the Spirits more. I knew they had talked to me on my Quest. Maybe they would talk to me even more. I was ready to listen.

Penny and I started preparing for her Quest. She tried a couple of times to ask me what it was like, but I wouldn't tell her. "It's too personal, Penny. It'll probably be different for you, anyway."

We got our camping gear ready. The big day arrived, and I rode to Penny's house early in the morning. She looked scared, but hid it well from her mom. We had breakfast and rode to the park.

"All I get is my cloak, huh?"

"You get anything you want," I said.

"Yeah. But then it wouldn't be a Vision Quest. All my pockets are empty. Wish me luck."

"You don't need it, but I wish it for you anyway," I said.

"See you!" She disappeared into the woods.

I stashed her bike and rode slowly to the State Park. I had plenty of time. It looked like the weather was going to be nice, and it would be fun to do some swimming. I was tempted to worry about Penny, but I knew it wouldn't do her, or me, any good. I should enjoy myself, have some fun.

I arrived and registered for a bicycle campsite. There were only 2 of them, and no one ever seemed to use them. I wondered which one Penny had used. My tent didn't take long to set up. It looked cozy with my sleeping bag laid out inside it, but I knew now I didn't really need any of it.

The morning was still kind of cool, but I knew the lake would be a zoo later, so I changed into my swimsuit, closed my tent, and found a trail to the

water. There was a little roped-off swimming area, with floating platforms and lifeguards, and I used to go there when I was younger. On the rest of the beaches, there were signs that said NO LIFEGUARD — SWIM AT YOUR OWN RISK. Wasn't all of life at your own risk? I looked out at the water. One rowboat at the far end, about a mile away. I waded in, pebbles under my feet, and started swimming. A nice, easy five strokes per breath felt good.

I came up on a little beach at the other end. The day was starting to get warm. I was alone, but not lonely. There were people around if I wanted to be near them. The picnic area would be crawling soon. Penny was alone. Good luck, Penny.

I swam back, this time for speed. Four kicks per stroke. I pushed myself as hard as I could. Seven strokes per breath, then nine, each breath pushing my rhythm faster.

When I got back, I finally felt like being near people, so I got some lunch stuff and went over to the picnic area. People were starting to arrive. I sat down near the water to eat my lunch. Kids and adults were in the swimming area now, and there were more canoes and rowboats and stuff on the lake. I finished eating and just soaked up some sun.

All of a sudden there were about five teenagers standing around me, one of them holding a volleyball. "We need one more person to make the teams even. Can you play?"

"I'm not super-great at it . . ."

"Come on!"

I went. I forgot all about Penny. After a few plays, I was really getting the hang of it.

"What's your name?" a girl asked.

"Ariel."

"Are you Ariel the Swimmer?" a guy asked.

Oh, shit. Why did I have to do those demos? I wasn't sure what to answer, because I didn't know what they felt about Ariel the Swimmer. So I just smiled at him. He smiled back.

We played for a long time, and finally they had to go home. I went back to my tent and changed into my clothes. It was almost evening. I ate something, and then decided to go for a walk.

There were a few people on the trails during the evening, but as soon as it got dark, I found myself alone. I was surprised, but then remembered that I was used to the dark, and few other people were. After walking awhile, I got a little bored, so I headed back to camp. I wondered how Penny was doing.

There wasn't anything interesting happening at the campground, so I crawled into my tent, lit a candle, and got out the paperback book I was reading.



Morning. Penny's on the home stretch now. Hang in there, Penny.

I got dressed and washed up at the restroom. I wanted to do some tree climbing today. I ate some cereal with reconstituted milk on it, and picked a trail into the woods. Alder bending! I hadn't done it in years. The trees had to be slender, just a couple of inches across. I picked one and started climbing. The tree started bending. I kept going up. It started to lower me to the ground. Watch the roots, Ariel. Sometimes they pop out of the ground. I went a little farther, hung by my hands, and as my feet touched the ground, I let go. The tree snapped back upright. "Thank you, tree!"

I found the three-mile nature trail and started running. It was fun to fly through the woods, trees and bushes whizzing by on both sides. Up hill and down hill, around the beaver pond.

When I got back to the campground, I was lonely for my friend. It would be fun if we could really come camping here together someday. I ate lunch, and kept wishing it was time to go meet her. I swam the lake again, and then lay on the warm sand near the swimming area.

"Would you teach me to swim?"

I looked up and there was a girl standing over me, about seven years old. She had long black hair.

"Why do you want *me* to teach you?"

"I saw you swim the lake yesterday and today. You're *good*. I want to be that good. Will you teach me?"

I was almost shocked. I had never had anyone give me that much respect before. We got into the water and worked on floating. I told her how the name of the game was conserving energy. She really listened to me. She really wanted to learn from me. Her name was Rachel.

We worked for hours. I was really being a teacher, and it felt good. We worked on strokes, and rhythm, and breathing. I had the feeling the whole time I was teaching someone very special.

The sun started getting low. “Rachel, I have to go meet my friend. You know enough now to get really good if you stick with it and practice. Thanks for letting me teach you.”

“Thanks, Ariel. I’ll practice, I promise.”

I dried off and changed, packed everything up and loaded it on my bike. I got to the park and dug Penny’s bike out of the woods a little before sunset. I waited.

The sun set and out of the woods came one tired but smiling ten-year-old. She drained a water bottle, then said, “*Now* I know why you couldn’t talk about it.”



Chapter 27

Penny needed some time alone, just like I had. But she came over the day before we were supposed to meet Michael, and said, "I'm ready to swim across the inlet. I want to do it tomorrow if that guy's around."

"Want some company?"

"Yeah!"



We packed lunches, suits and towels, and headed for our swimming beach early Saturday morning. Michael was already there. I had a hunch he would be, and I knew why. But no one said anything about magic yet — it wasn't time. The three of us walked up to the house where the canoe guy lived. He answered the door.

"You guys are lucky. I'm leaving town tomorrow for a while. Are all three of you going to swim it?"

"Not me!" Michael said. "I'll just help paddle."

He changed into his swim trunks and got out the canoe. He told us his name was Tom. "If you guys don't mind paddling back, I'll swim it too. I haven't done it in a while."

"Sure. But won't you be tired after paddling across for us?" I asked.

"Maybe. I'll see."

Michael offered to do most of the paddling so Tom wouldn't get tired from it.

When we got onto the beach, Penny said, "Nice and easy. Five strokes.

You set the pace.”

“Sounds good,” I said.

Tom and Michael got into the canoe. “You guys ready?”

“Yep!”

We waded in until the water was deep enough, then swam. Nice slow rhythm. We soon passed the half-mile buoy. We swam. When I came up to breathe on that side, I could glimpse the canoe near us. It was good to know it was there. It wasn’t long before I heard Tom yell, “ONE MILE!”

I was fine. I could tell Penny was in good form beside me. I kept my rhythm as even as I could. Still five strokes per breath. “TWO MILES!”

I really knew I had done some swimming. I went a little farther, then knew it was time for more air. I switched to three strokes per breath, and Penny did a moment later. That felt better, but I knew it would slow us down. “THREE MILES!”

I was getting really tired. My arms were getting heavy. I was having to concentrate on moving them more than before. I knew I could go to floating any time, but I wanted to do my best to swim straight through. Penny was still with me, and so was the canoe. A little farther, and I started to feel light-headed, and soon after that, like I was floating. I remembered clearly the last time that had happened, and quickly turned over and stretched out to float. Penny joined me as soon as she noticed. I bet she didn’t have to. She’s a good friend. The canoe slowed to a stop.

“You guys swam more than three miles straight. Amazing!” Tom said.

“How are you?” Penny asked.

“Started getting light-headed, like at my test. I’m okay now. Maybe another minute and I can go on.”

“Okay. No hurry.”

I floated and kicked lightly until I felt rested. Less than a mile to go. “Let’s swim,” I said and turned over. Three strokes. My arms were still a little heavy, but not too bad. I could see the beach getting closer. A few more minutes. Stay loose, arms. Penny was beside me. Here comes the bottom . . .

We made it! I crawled onto the beach and collapsed. Michael came over and sat with us. Penny and I just breathed. Three miles without resting. Four in all. With my eyes closed, I let the sun warm my shaking body. I felt

strong and proud. I had limits, but I was strong.

Tom came over. "You guys ready to swim back?"

I laughed, just a little.

"I think I'll swim it, but I'm not in as good a shape as you guys. Stay with me." Tom started jogging around on the beach to warm up.

I felt a burst of courage, sat up and fully intended to crawl over to Michael and kiss him, but just then he grabbed a rock and threw it into the water. My courage faded and I lay back down and rested some more.

After a few more minutes, everyone was ready to go. The three of us got in the canoe and Tom got in the water and we started across. Michael paddled and Penny and I took turns. Michael was ready to talk.

"While you guys were doing your special thing, whatever it was, I did some reading about magic. I did some tree climbing and running too, and a couple of days ago I did 20 laps in the pool without stopping."

"Michael!" Penny said. "If you did 20 laps straight, I bet you could do a mile with a couple of rests."

"You think so? Anyway, I've decided. I want to learn magic and become a Wood Sprite!"

"Great!" we said. Tom took a floating break at about a mile, so we talked to him. After a few minutes he started swimming again.

"We have a Pact," I said. "It's just about secrecy and honesty. We'll show you when we get home."

"Will you tell us about the stuff you've read?" Penny said. "We don't know everything, you know."

"If you want. It wasn't how to do magic, it was just what some people think about magic."

"There's hardly anything good about how to do magic. You just have to learn things and figure it out for yourself," I explained.

Tom rested at about two miles.

"Penny," I began, "I would sort of like to tell my mom and dad about this swim. Can you see any harm in that?"

She thought a minute. "Sounds okay to me. They know about the demos and Search and Rescue and stuff."

Then I started telling Michael about how the training would go. "The first

part is getting basically good at Earth things, like running, Air things, like climbing and swinging, Water things, swimming, and Fire. We'll teach you how to make fire without matches, and make you a fire pouch. When you think you're ready, you'll have a test day where you do it all in one day."

We weren't quite to three miles, but Tom rested. He looked really tired. "We're right here, Tom."

Tom swam, and Penny said, "The second part of the training is all about the night, and darkness, and silence, and being alone. You'll learn to move through the woods quickly and silently. You'll learn how to see in the dark and not be afraid of it. And you'll learn how to be alone with yourself. The final test is called the Vision Quest. Ariel and me just did them. We each spent two days and one night alone in the woods, with nothing to eat or drink, nothing to do, no fire, no camping gear, nothing but trees."

"Wow! That sounds . . . scary! What's it like?"

"It's too personal to talk about," I said. "But it's wonderful, and it really helped me to be strong, and to know who I am."

"All that stuff is just the physical, outdoors stuff," Penny said. "Then there's still studying and learning from books, and each other, and going to church. Going to church is important. Can you do that?"

"What for?"

I said, "This isn't just a game, Michael. Wood Sprites are like a kind of priest. We are doing God's work. We have to know everything we can about God, and talk to him and his Spirits every chance we get."

"But my church is so dumb!"

"Penny, how about if Michael goes with me to church sometimes, and with you sometimes?"

"That would be fun. Do you think you could?"

"I don't think my parents would say I couldn't go to *church*. They might wonder what drug I was on, but they'd let me."

At about three and a half miles, near the buoy on this side, Tom took a long rest. We talked to him, and told him how strong he looked in the water. Finally, he swam slowly on in. We hugged him, thanked him for coming with us, and helped him put away the canoe. He went home and the three of us sat on the beach and ate lunch.

"After what we've told you, do you still want to be a Wood Sprite?" I asked.

Michael didn't answer for awhile. "What happens if I do it, and then find out it's not for me?"

I answered. "You will have promised us, when you sign the Pact, that you will keep us secret if you leave. That's all. We're not the Mafia, you know."

"Will you keep it secret that I'm doing it?"

"Absolutely!" Penny said. "All anyone else knows, including our parents, is that we run and swim and do stuff like that together."

Michael looked at each of us. "Okay. I'd like to try it."

We all went to my house, lit candles in my room, and I read the Pact to Michael. Then he read it to himself.

"Who wrote this? It's beautiful!"

"Penny and I both do calligraphy. You can learn if you want. You have to learn if you ever want to write in the Grimoire."

"In the *what*?"

I explained, and told him he couldn't look at other pages quite yet. He read the Pact again, pricked his finger, and signed it with his own blood.



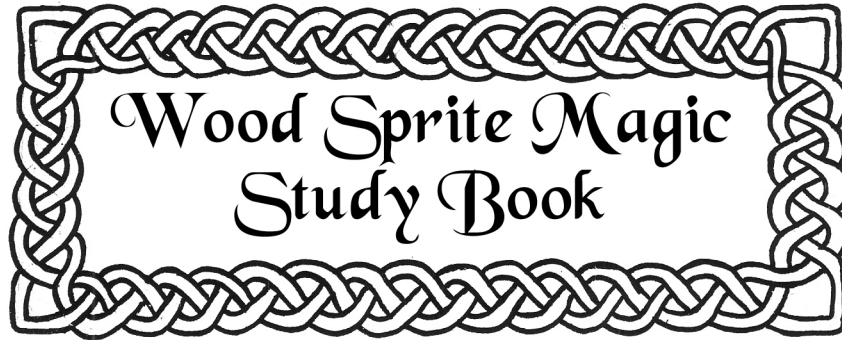
It was late August. The three of us climbed trees together, ran, and swam almost every day. Michael started going to church with one of us, and sometimes we would all three go to one of our churches.

Penny and I realized we needed to get more organized in our training of new people. We had the physical stuff pretty well figured out, but not the magical studies. We started making lists of all the books we had found useful. I had to go back to all the libraries to find the books I had used.

Penny came up with the idea of photocopying the good pages, and putting together our own book. It was a good idea, and we began working on it right after school started in September. We copied pages from encyclopedias, books about religion and philosophy, history books, books about magical things, fairy tales, and whatever else we thought was good. I borrowed my dad's typewriter, and pecked at it until we had a list of the books we didn't photocopy because there was too much good stuff in them.

We had both been reading the Bible, and we took hours one day deciding which books in it we thought all Wood Sprites should read. I typed up the list.

Penny got a binder from her garage. We punched holes in all the sheets of paper from copying and typing, and I made a nice cover for it from some thick paper. I used a new calligraphy style I had been practicing, and Penny added a border she had learned how to do.



We put it all together in early October, even though we knew we would add more pages later. It was beautiful. We told Michael about it, and we told him about the Grove, but not where it was. We wanted to save that for Halloween.



Chapter 28

It was a normal Tuesday in mid-October. Winter was in the air and leaves were starting to change color on the trees. I had just gone to second class period, which was English. It was about 9:15.

The intercom buzzer sounded, and the teacher answered it. "Yes. Yes, sir. Right away!"

"Ariel, you're wanted in the principal's office, *immediately*."

"Me?" I said.

The whole class started making taunting noises and saying, "Wha'd you do, Ariel?" I was confused. I hadn't done anything! I picked up my books and purse and headed slowly for the door. Everyone was teasing me. I walked down the hall and into the office. I wish Michael was here.

Just as I entered the office, someone came running in behind me, past me and up to the counter. It was a Sheriff's deputy, all in uniform. "Is Ariel here yet?" he asked the secretary.

"Right behind you," she said.

He turned and looked at me, "Search and Rescue climber?"

I relaxed. I wasn't in trouble after all. "That's me."

"We've got a little boy in a tree, and we can't get him from the ground or the air."

I threw my books on the counter. "I'll need to stop by my house and get my boots and gloves. Someone has ropes and climbing gear?"

We ran out to the Sheriff's car and I got in the front seat beside the deputy.

He asked me my phone number and had the dispatcher call my house. When we got there, Mom was in the street with my stuff. "Thanks, Mom!"

"Be careful!"

He turned on his flashing lights and we flew through town as I got my boots on. Soon we were out on the west side of town, in an area where not many people lived. Down a dirt road, and there was a medic truck there, a fire truck, another Sheriff's car, and the Search and Rescue leader's car. We hopped out and Jack ran up to me.

"Ariel, there's a little four-year-old boy in a tree about halfway down the slope. He's out on slender branches, and can't or won't back down. It's too far for the ladders, the ground under the tree is steep and rocky, there's too much above him to get in by chopper, and that would probably just blow him off anyway. Will you take a look at it?"

The sky was dark and it looked like rain or snow. I could see a lady crying over by the Sheriff's car. It dawned on me how strange it was for a 12-year-old girl to be *asked* to take a look at a situation that firemen and Sheriff's deputies couldn't handle. "What kind of tree?"

"Big maple. He's up about 75 feet, I think."

"The frost has hardly even melted," I said.

"Yeah. We've got a line running down the hill to the base of the tree."

I zipped up my jacket and followed him to the edge. It was steep. We made our way down the rope to the tree. There were several firemen there. "Light him up for a moment, please!" Jack said.

A fireman turned on a spotlight.

The little boy squinted and cried.

God, he really was out on the edge, and his branches were bending down so that every time he moved, they got thinner. I looked down at the rocks under him. If he falls, no more little kid. The maple trunk was thick and steep, and they already had some ropes in the tree.

"I hope you can do something, Ariel. You're a hundred pounds lighter than the rest of us."

"But he's out on twigs! Shine the light a little to the left, above him. If I can get up there, I can get him on the way down."

"That branch is pretty thin," Jack said.

"Yeah, I know."

"Here's your gear all ready to go."

I stepped into the harness and looked at the heavy coil of rope, then up at the tree I had to climb. "I'll never make it with that. Give me two hundred feet of paracord." I clipped a couple of carabiners and a friction descendeur to my harness.

"Yes, but . . . Okay, I can see why. Just don't count on that stuff to arrest a fall." He dug out a coil of rope about as thick as clothesline, and I clipped it to my waist.

"Good luck, young lady!" one of the firemen said.

The wind was blowing and the sky getting darker. I pulled myself up the first rope that got me past the main trunk. I could see some of the garden hoses that the boy, and probably lots of his friends, had used to climb the tree. Along the big branch a few feet, then up another rope the firemen had put in. That was the last one, and I was only about half way up.

Rain drops. Shit. Someone was on a megaphone telling the boy to hold on and be calm. My limb was about a foot across and almost straight up. I started shimmying.

It forked. I followed each with my eyes. The one to the right went to the boy. But if I went that way, I would triple the weight on those thin branches. The one to the left went above him and stayed a little thicker. I had the same feeling I had when I began the mile swim on my first test day more than a year before — it was going to be close.

I started climbing up the left fork. I was about 50 feet up now. The rain was cold and the branch was slick, but it felt strong. I kept climbing. I hope he holds on after all this . . .

I must be 60 feet up. The firemen and Jack look so small down there. Keep going, Ariel. There's a little boy up here who needs you, and the rain is falling on him, too. The branch was about six inches thick now, and starting to bend slightly under my weight. Seventy feet. I was almost to his level. "Hi! What's your name?" I called to the boy.

"Where's my mommy?"

"Will you let me take you to her?"

"Tell her to come here."

"She can't climb trees as good as you can. But I bet she'd like to learn, if you'd teach her."

"I wanna go home."

So much for sweet talk. I was starting to shake, but I had to ignore it. Up. I came level with the boy and kept going.

"Aren't you going to save me?" he asked, whining.

"You know," I said, "I think you could save yourself easier, but since you won't, I guess I'll have to." I heard a brief chuckle from someone below as I climbed higher.

The branch was about three inches thick, and swaying all over the place. I didn't dare go higher. I looked down. I was about 10 feet above the boy. It would be enough, I hoped. I fed the rope down on both sides of the branch, pulled 10 feet back up, and threaded it into my descendeur, locking it.

Then there was a snap. I looked, and the branch the boy was on was starting to break.

"Help me!" he cried.

It had only broken halfway through, but I could hear it threatening to go the rest of the way.

"Tree, I love you. Here goes!" I took a deep breath and jumped out away from the boy. During the second I was in the air, I realized this was exactly what Jack warned me not to do. Oh, well. The rope jerked me after I flew 10 feet and my limb bounced. I swung toward the boy, held the rope with one hand, and let my other hand wrap around him as we hit.

My weight, added to his, made his branch snap. It fell and I held onto him with all my strength.

"Look out!" someone yelled and I heard the branch land on the rocks.

We swung back and slammed into the other branch. Hold on, Ariel! I could feel my rope hand bleeding and my head ringing, but I had to hold onto the rope and the boy! I had to!

We were swinging free. He was crying his eyes out, and I wanted to join him so badly, but I didn't dare. The branch above bounced us up and down.

"We're not home yet, kid, it's 75 feet down. I need both hands, can you hold onto me?"

He just kept crying.

"I need your help or we're going to die!" I screamed at him and shook him. He looked at me with big, wet eyes. "Where's my mommy?"

"She's waiting for you. You can either help me, and we'll go down alive, or we'll both fall and die."

I think that little boy grew up years as he took in what I said. "Really?"

"Really."

After a long pause, he said, "What's your name?"

"Ariel. What's yours?"

"Ben."

"Okay, Ben. I have to use both my hands on the rope to get us down. That means you have to hold onto me, okay?"

"Okay, Ariel."

"You can just stay right here on my side and put your arms around me." I felt his arms. "Keep holding, Ben." I carefully moved my good hand to the descendeur and started us moving downward. We bounced, and up above I heard creaking. "Please, beautiful tree, stay with us. You wouldn't let a Wood Sprite down, would you?"

"A what?" the boy asked.

"Nothing." I lowered us on down, as smoothly as I could. We were about a third of the way, I think. The branches were nice and thick here, but I reminded myself that the rope was still over a slender stick way up above us.

My rope hand, inside its glove, was bleeding all over my arm, but I didn't even look at it. Down, that was the goal. Down. I could hear people talking and see lights shining. Two-thirds, maybe. Hail started to beat on us. I let the rope work through the descendeur.

Even before my feet touched the ground, a fireman grabbed the boy and Jack grabbed me. "Get a medic down here!" he yelled when he saw my arm.

A paramedic came down with a kit, looked at the boy briefly, and then started on my hand. The last I saw of little Ben was him riding on the shoulders of a fireman up the steep slope.

"You have some friends here," Jack said as the medic wrapped my hand.

A few minutes later, I climbed the slope with Jack. When we got to the top, there was my mom and dad, and Penny and Michael! They surrounded me with hugs.

“Can I give your name to the reporters?” Jack asked.

“No!” I said.



Chapter 29

The medics bandaged my hand, and then the five of us went out for a hamburger feast.

"I'm really proud of my girl," Dad said. "It's been hard getting used to the things you do, but I'm really proud. I only hope you live through it."

"I was so torn when the Sheriff called for your boots," Mom said. "I was proud, but I wanted to tell them to let someone else do it."

"But Mom, Penny's the only other person who could have climbed into that tree!"

We talked and laughed some more. When we were just about to leave, my dad said, "You know, Honey, you're going to have to tell people at school what happened,"

"No I don't," I said. "It's not their business and they don't have to know."

Then Mom said, "Well I'm going to call the school and tell them . . ."

"No!" I yelled and stared at my mom. "I have to go to school there, not you! Do you know how hard it is being different, Mom? You always ask me why I don't have more friends. Well, it's because hardly anybody will even talk to me *because* I do my homework, and *because* I do strange things like swimming and tree climbing. Please don't make it worse!" I was crying and Michael had his arm around me.

"I'm sorry, Honey. I just wanted to let the teachers know . . ."

"Yeah, and they'll just stand up in every class and blab it."



Everyone was very quiet on the way home. Penny had to go back to school, but Michael stayed out to be with me. We went for a walk.

"I know I should be proud, Michael, but I'm just scared instead." We walked on a little ways. "Scared that if I tell anyone about Search and Rescue and stuff, then they'll find out about the Grove too." I was quiet for another minute. "And scared that if I start doing it to be big at school, I'll get conceited and won't be able to do magic."

"Can I tell you what's *really* happening?"

After a while I said, "Okay."

"Everyone knows . . . about the demos you did, and about Search and Rescue, and about your swimming speed and climbing and things. But they don't know the truth, just vague and sometimes twisted rumors."

I walked in silence.

"It seems to me that you can either teach them what it's *really* like, or let them believe the rumors."

I thought about it all evening and half the night, the half I didn't sleep.



At my very first class the next day, the teacher whispered in my ear, "Do you want to share anything with the class?"

I thought about it for a moment. I knew everyone could see my bandaged hand. With my heart in my throat, I looked at him, "Yes, I do."

As soon as he had taken attendance, he nodded to me. I sat on my desk and started talking to them.

"Yesterday I met a little four-year-old boy, and for about an hour, he was more important to me than anyone else in the world . . ."



Michael met me after school and we walked home together.

"How did it go?"

"I did it! I told them! And I didn't feel like I was doing it for glory. I knew I was some kind of teacher, but I had been thinking I would just be a teacher of Wood Sprite magic. You made me realize that maybe I have something to teach all the kids."

"Weren't you afraid they'd find out about the Grove?"

"I was. But now I think I have to trust the Sprites to be careful. And if we

all are, nothing should happen.”

When we got to my house, Mom said, “There’s a letter for you on the table. Your Search and Rescue leader brought it by.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

I got some cookies out for me and Michael and we sat down.

“Michael!” I said, opening the letter, “there’s money in here! Lots of money!” I counted it. “Mom! There’s a thousand dollars in here!”

“Read the letter!” she said.

Dear Ariel,

I was so happy to get my little Benjamin back that I forgot about you for a while. It was only after you had left that I found out you were a volunteer, and a young person. Benjamin only knew your first name. He liked you very much, and talked about you for hours. I also learned you hurt your hand. I hope this money covers all your expenses. Thank you so very much, Ariel.

*Love,
Sally Smith*

Tears were rolling down my face. “I thought they had forgotten all about me.” I hugged Mom and Michael. “I’m going to the bank!”



Chapter 30

It was exciting seeing my bank balance of \$1,127.58 printed in my bankbook. I made myself a promise on the way home, that I would never touch the \$1000 except for something very important.

Halloween was coming. It was the one day of the year we let other people see us in our Wood Sprite cloaks. My bandage was soon off as nothing had been broken, so I got busy on a cloak for Michael, and Penny helped me — she had learned how to use the sewing machine. “Do you think he’ll make a good Sprite?” she asked.

“Yes. Remember how he wasn’t worried about the magic or the training, but just about what other people would think and what we would do to him? Turn him into a frog or something!”

We both laughed.

“You like him, don’t you?” Penny asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe it would be fun to have a boyfriend. We’ve started to eat lunch together at school and stuff. I’m just not sure I’m ready for it.”

“I am!” Penny said.

“I know. Just don’t get pregnant, okay?”

“That part I know all about. I just haven’t found the boy! Would you do a love spell for me?”

“Pink candle or red candle?”

“Both!”

“I think we should start with pink,” I said with a smile. I had been reading

about amulets, so I decided to try it for Penny's love spell. At first I wasn't sure if it was right to do, one Sprite casting a spell for another Sprite. Wasn't that just a sneaky way of casting a spell for yourself? I thought about it for days. I talked to the Spirit of Counsel about it. I finally decided it was okay — we were people too, and we needed things in life just like other people did. I bought some thin pink cord, found a scrap of pink material, and kept my eyes open for the most important part.

Halloween was on a Saturday. Everyone came over about noon and we made crazy hamburgers for us and my parents. We seemed to do things at my house most of the time because my parents let us do the most stuff. We had ketchup and pickles all over the table, and everybody was laughing. We didn't have to feel guilty because we were the clean-up crew, too.

Michael was embarrassed as Penny and I put white and black makeup on his face. We were giggling the whole time. While Penny put glitter in his hair, I read aloud from our study book.

"Samhain was one of the two major fire festivals of the year, Beltane being the other. A prominent custom in Celtic lands was that each person around the bonfire would toss in a white stone with their mark upon it. In the morning, if any stone was not found, that person had received an omen that he or she would not live to see another Samhain . . ."

"Whoa!" Michael said. "I'm not doing that!"

"That's not magic, it's just a superstitious old custom," I said.

Michael breathed a sigh of relief.

We got on the bus and went out to the college Haunted House. It was different this year, with lots of things you could touch. I liked the Witch's Cauldron. You couldn't see into it. We reached in . . . raw oysters! Penny screamed.

We haunted the campus awhile, then went back to town. Michael bought us milkshakes.

"I'm dying to see the Grove! Can we really camp out there?"

"If we can work around our parents. But it's a special place, remember that. Only Wood Sprite things are done there. And *no one* but Sprites know about it, right?"

"Right!" he said.

At my house, Penny and I got into our cloaks. Michael got this pouty look on his face.

“Where did you guys get those?”

“We made them.” I had my hands behind my back.

“Can I make one?”

“No,” I said, and handed him his cloak. “Wood Sprites take care of each other!”

Penny giggled.

“Thanks!”



The wind blew at us on the way to the park, and clouds skittered around the sky. It was going to be a wonderfully spooky night.

“How can it be at the park? I’ve been everywhere there, even in the wild area with you guys!”

“Everywhere?”

“Yeah. Except that thorny place.”

Penny and I cracked up. “Come on!”

We led him into the woods behind the picnic area, and to the Hedge. Penny found an almost-invisible crawl hole and led the way in.

“You guys are crazy. Ouch! This place is all thorns!”

We came to the other side. “The Guardian Hedge goes all the way around the Grove.”

“Wow. I never would have guessed there was a forest inside here. This place is magical before you even get there!”

“Come on!”

We wound through the alders and maples. I could almost see the place through Michael’s eyes, how special it must seem, hidden here in the thorns.

We climbed the hill into the cedars. “You guys are really lucky. I mean, *we* are really lucky!” he said.

We stopped near the middle of the Grove. “No one goes into the Magic Circle except for ceremonies and actual magic work.” We showed him all around, and Penny and I got ready to make fire. Michael watched closely. Flames were soon leaping into the wood we stacked in the fire pit.

“Feels nice. It’s going to be cold tonight,” I said, warming my hands. “We

are casting a spell tonight. Are you ready, Penny? Are you prepared to receive what you say you want?"

A strange look came onto Penny's face. "I think so."

"I don't want to do it unless you're sure. Maybe you should go talk to some Spirits about it."

"Okay. Let's dedicate the Grove first."

Penny got out a white candle and lit it at the fire. We stood around the outside of the Magic Circle. I said, "We dedicate this Grove to God and all good Spirits. Only white magic is done here. May evil and selfishness flee from this place!"

Penny stepped in and set her candle on the altar. I took Michael by the hand and led him back to the fire pit, putting my finger to my lips.

I gazed into the flames and thought about the spell I might be doing — if Penny was ready. It would be okay if she wasn't. Sitting beside Michael made me start thinking about love too. I'm probably less ready than Penny. Michael gazed into the flames.

Penny came back a few minutes later, sat down, and took a deep breath. "I'm ready."

I smiled at my friend. Michael and I got out more white candles, and the three of us stepped into the Circle.

"First we have a lesson, requested by Michael. How do we tell the difference between white magic, black magic, and superstition. Penny and I came up with four things that make it white. Penny?"

"It doesn't hurt anyone. It helps someone other than the magician. Umm . . . it isn't done for reward. And it follows the laws of God."

"Black magic," I went on, "is forceful or selfish. It tries to force nature or Spirits or people to do things. It's done for reward, glory if nothing else."

"You mean we shouldn't do magic as an ego trip, right?" Michael asked.

"Exactly. If you did, you wouldn't have the wisdom to know if it was right to do it, or even how to do it. Superstitions are just things people make up and don't have any way to work except by people believing in them."

"Don't we have to believe in the magic we do?" Penny asked.

"We sure do, because we have to show God we're sincere. But the power comes from God. If God and his Spirits don't agree, no magic. Superstitions

don't need God."

Everyone, including me, thought about what I had said. "Any other ideas?"

Everyone was silent.

"Let's have prayer time." I closed my eyes. Spirit of Understanding, I hope this doesn't break any of God's laws. I don't think so. As long as it's only our intention? Yes, I understand.

I brought the pink candle out of my cloak, lit it and set it on the altar. "Spirit of Water, we offer this flame so that love will flow to Penny, and her love will flow to others. We ask that you fill her cup of love to overflowing, and that she will find the very best boy to share her cup with."

I had Penny hold out her hands, I brought out a little paper bag from my cloak, and poured pink flower petals into her hands. "Spirit of Courage, please let these rose petals remind Penny of her strength and beauty, so that the boy that is best for her will also see her clearly." I brought out a pink cord, and a tiny little pouch about an inch wide I had made from the pink cloth. I poked several petals into the tiny pouch, and tied it closed with the cord. Another knot made the cord into a necklace. I slipped it over Penny's head, and sprinkled the rest of the petals into her hair.

"Wear this everyday. Remember that you can never force or hurry love. It will come when God is willing, and when your lover is ready for you."

We were all silent for a minute. Michael's mouth was hanging open.

"Our special celebration tonight is trick-or-treating," Penny began, "but first we have bread to share." She brought out a big dinner roll. "God, we want to remember all the people who have died. They were your children too." We shared the roll, each person quiet with their own thoughts. I remembered my grandmother who had died. I think she knew a lot about God. I hope I get to see you again, Grandmother.

We finished, took up the candles, and stepped out of the Magic Circle. "Thank you, Grove, for letting us be here on Halloween to pray and do magic," Penny said.

Back by the fire, Michael was still speechless as we warmed our hands and let the fire die down.

Penny said, "Ariel, we need to bring a shovel here to put out the fire. I

think my mom has a little one she doesn't use. I'll find out."

"Okay. We can use sticks today. Everybody ready for trick-or-treating?"

A smile crept onto Michael's face. "Yeah!"

We put out the fire, put away candles and stuff, and got ready to leave.

"Hey! It's dark! I can't see a thing!" he said.

We giggled. We could see just fine. I took him by the hand and we headed out.



Michael hadn't been trick-or-treating in years. But he liked our style — lurking from house to house through yards and behind bushes. He caught on fast how to move quickly and silently in the dark. On one street some egg throwers came by. We hid, came up behind them with hoods on, and practically scared them into eating their own eggs!

We collected lots of goodies, and were just about to go home, when we heard the sound of someone crying. We stopped and listened. A few houses down, there was a little girl in a skeleton costume, standing on the sidewalk, all alone.

"Okay, Wood Sprites, no hoods, or we'll scare the pee out of her," I said.

We went up to the little five-year-old. "Can we help?" Michael asked her.

"My big brother was going to take me trick-or-treating. But he forgot and went to a party," she said through sobs.

I looked at Penny. "We could use a little more candy and stuff, couldn't we?"

"Sure!"

"We'll take you trick-or-treating, okay?" Michael said.

"Would you? I'm not supposed to go alone."

It occurred to me that she probably wasn't supposed to go trick-or-treating with strangers either, but it wasn't *our* fault she was alone. "Let's go!" We picked a street we hadn't been down yet. The little girl loved it. Her bag wasn't very big, and it filled fast. At the last house we went to, a man opened the door.

"Let me see here. A skeleton, and three Druidic Bards. Wonderful! Is chocolate okay?"

Now *my* mouth was hanging open. How did he know? I memorized the

house number. I kept it to myself, but someday I had to find out how he knew.



Chapter 31

When we arrived at the November Search and Rescue meeting, Mr. Neils was there with his CPR dummies and his miles of bandaging. “How are my two young ones doing?”

“We’re fine.”

“Many rescues this year?”

“Only one big one. A helicopter crashed in the woods,” I said.

“I remember hearing about that. How do you like Delta team?”

“A little boring sometimes, but okay,” Penny said.

“Gives you a chance to ease into it. I hear you’ll have a new person tonight.”

That was news to us, but soon a guy about 25 arrived that we didn’t know. Jack started the meeting, and told him about the trial membership.

“Hi. I’m Bob. I’m pretty good at backpacking, and I figured I should do something to help out the community.”

People on the team asked him about how far he could run, and swim, and stuff like that. He looked strong, and the answers he gave confirmed it. Mabel explained about Delta team for the first year. Everybody liked him, and we voted him in as a trial member.

We all worked for hours with Mr. Neils. He taught Bob a lot, and made sure no one else on the team had any weaknesses. We had splints, bandages, and CPR dummies all over the house, but it was fun. Jack passed out fresh emergency food packets to everyone, and we went out for pizza.



Michael started to learn how to make fire. We had to get more flint, but we had pouches and everything else. We worked in my backyard, and always rewarded ourselves with toasted marshmallows.

"I have a kind of magic I already know, and I think you guys will like it," he said after building a fire one evening.

"Really? What is it?"

"Close your eyes. Tighter, and no peeking!"

"He's going to turn me into a snake!" Penny joked.

We could hear him putting something together, something made of wood. Then there was a low tone, and another, and finally a whole melody, mysterious and secret, like the notes were lurking in and out of caves and tunnels. A flute! No, not quite. I listened. It was an old melody, medieval maybe. The notes were low and mellow. The song ended.

"Can we open our eyes?"

"Yeah."

"A recorder! It's beautiful, Michael! I didn't know they went so low."

"This is an alto recorder. I have a soprano at home too, but I like the lower notes. Do you think it has a place in magical stuff?"

"It is magic!" Penny said.

"Yeah. That'll really be nice at the Grove. I could just sit by the fire for hours and listen to you play!" I said.

"Thanks. I was hoping you guys would like it. I want to learn other kinds of magic too."

We nodded.

Michael played another song. It fluttered like bees and butterflies on a summer day. "I'm going to get some new music soon. I want to learn more medieval and renaissance stuff."

"Michael, you're our official Bard!"



Michael made photocopies of a few things he had read, and Penny copied some Tarot stuff. I found some new things too. One Saturday, when my parents were out of town, we took apart our study book and spread it out on the living room floor. I had a couple of sets of notebook subject dividers, and

we tried to make some sense out of it.

"I've got the history pile. I'm going to try to put it in chronological order," Michael said.

"Tarot and astrology over here," Penny said.

"I'll do religion and philosophy. Where do fairy tales go?" I asked.

"In their own section, with myths and legends and superstitions," Michael said.

"Here's a pile for herbs and amulets."

We shuffled the pages for hours. I calligraphied the subject tabs, and we finally put it all back together. It looked really nice, and it was a lot easier to find things now.

"I need to read more of this stuff," Michael said.

"Start with the general stuff first," I suggested. "Details can come later."

"I have a surprise," Penny said. We looked at her. I wondered if she had found her true love.

"Well?" Michael prodded.

"I'm ready to do a Tarot card reading. Only . . . I'm not sure what to do it about. You said once it shouldn't be for myself, Ariel."

"Yeah. That would be like casting spells for yourself."

"I see what you mean. Can we go to the Grove tonight?"

"Okay with me. Can you come, Michael?"

"Sure, but won't it be wet?"

"It never seems to get wet under the cedars. Why don't we eat dinner and then go? I bet we'll think of something for Penny to do."

We made soup and sandwiches, with Halloween candy for dessert, got all our magical stuff, and headed for the park. There was snow on the ground, but we were dressed for it, and the snow made it easier to see in the dark. We slipped into our blue cloaks and disappeared into the woods.

At the Grove, we had some silent time in the darkness. The ground was dry in most places. "Michael, will you build the fire?"

"Sure!" He went over to the fire pit and Penny and I went to the storage hollow for candles. When we got back, Michael was just sitting there with a glum look on his face. "I forgot my fire pouch."

"A Wood Sprite without a fire pouch. Shame, shame!" Penny taunted with

a smile.

"If you'll play, I'll kindle," I said. I knew Michael hadn't forgotten his recorder.

He smiled and brought it out of a cloak pocket. He played a happy frolicking song as I blew a spark to life and built up a nice, toasty blaze.

"I have it!" Penny said. "I should ask the Tarot cards about the next Sprite! You think that would be okay?"

"Who would it help?" Michael asked.

Penny thought. "Maybe . . . I don't know."

"How about asking how we can help new people join?" I suggested.

"That would help us *and* the new people!" Penny said.

I looked at Michael.

"Sounds okay to me."

We lit three candles, dedicated the Grove, and sat in the Magic Circle, Penny in front of the altar. I held the Grimoire — she said she might need it.

Penny looked nervous. This was her first time doing magic. She took out her little box of Tarot cards and set it on the altar. "There's something missing. A special candle?"

I opened the Grimoire to the page on candle colors. "Purple, for magical skills."

Penny took up a white candle and stepped out of the Circle. I told Michael how we always held a burning candle when going into or out of the Magic Circle at night, and that was why we lit a candle for each person. Penny returned and lit the purple candle.

"What do I say?"

"Just talk to a Spirit."

"Which one?"

"How about Counsel?" I suggested.

She took a deep breath. "Spirit of Counsel . . . I, no *we* offer this purple flame — I mean purple candle — so we can find out what we want to know — no, that's not right — so we can find out what you want us to know, from the Tarot cards. This is hard . . ."

"You're doing great," I said, holding in the urge to laugh.

Penny opened the box. "I'm only using the 22 major Arcana." She took

out part of the deck and handed the box to Michael. "I want everybody to think about what we are asking. What is it again, Ariel?"

"What can we do to help new Sprites find us and join the Grove?"

Penny nodded and shuffled the cards, dropping one of them. "Oh, well. I think I'm ready, but I'm a little scared." She sat for a few moments with her eyes closed. Then she moved closer to the altar. "This row is for physical things, past, present, and future." She laid three cards face down on the altar, one beside the other. "This row is for mental things." Three more cards, above the first three. "And this row is for spiritual things." There were now nine cards on the altar. She put the rest back in the box Michael was holding.

"That was the easy part. Now I have to read them."

"Remember, you have help," I said.

"Yeah. Please help me, Spirits." She turned over the first card. "Physical things in the past, there was a lot of sacrifice."

Penny and I looked at each other. "There sure was!" I said, remembering our training and testing.

She turned over the middle one in that row. "In the present, victory." She glanced at Michael. "And in the future . . . patience? Look up Taurus for me."

"Patience, persistence, temperance . . . Penny, we need to remember how these are laid out so we can think about them later on. Could you put them back in the box in this order, so we can do it at home?"

"Okay, then we can take our time figuring out what it all means."

"I know what it means," Michael said. "Remember how some of the physical training has been harder for me than you guys because I'm older and heavier? What happens if the next person is 20? Or 30?"

"It would take them longer," I said.

"Or maybe they couldn't do something *at all*, but they were good at lots of magical things. What would we do then?"

Everyone was silent.

"Let's think about it more later," I said.

"The next row is mental things. In the past, randomness, the Wheel of Chance."

"I can see that!" I said. "I was just learning whatever I could find, sometimes from school lessons, sometimes things I stumbled upon in the

library, and I didn't have the study book or the Grimoire."

"In the present, wisdom and discretion."

Michael and I both nodded.

"In the future . . . faith, hope, and truth. The Star, or the true Teacher."

That really spoke to me. Over and over again I had been learning that I was some kind of teacher. But what kind . . . ?

"Spiritual things. In the past, the Lovers, or the Two Paths of temptation."

"Maybe that's the Two Paths of black and white magic," Michael said.

"The lovers makes sense too," I said. "I started learning magic because I once had a true Teacher. I loved him. But it wasn't physical love, more like . . . spiritual."

Penny put her arm around me. I think she saw that tears were close. After a minute, she went on.

"In the present, there is strength and power, spiritual power. And in the future . . ."

We all stared at the card. The Reaper. Death. No one said anything. Penny didn't even try to figure it out. After several minutes she picked up the cards and put them into the box. We quietly thanked the Grove, put out the fire, and went home.

I was sad, confused, and depressed. We silently waved good-bye to each other on the street corner, and I went home to bed and cried. I didn't even know why.



Chapter 32

The Reaper must always be viewed in the proper perspective. Pay close attention to the level: physical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, etc., in your interpretation. Also remember that with every death comes a rebirth, in other words, a transformation. If the Reaper appears in intellectual matters, it could mean the death of one idea, transformed into a new and possibly better idea . . .

Penny read that to us the very next day. She had met us after school and insisted we get together, and she had apologized and felt ashamed that she hadn't known how to read the card better.

"So it can mean," she said, "that some spiritual thing we believe will die and be replaced by a better one . . ."

"I think we have all learned a lesson," I said. "We took things way too seriously last night. If we find something like that we don't understand, we need to be calm and cool — we need to have patience and faith, and not run home like scared children."

Michael said, "I think Penny did a really good job. And I think Ariel's right. We were all weird last night. But asking for knowledge like that might be hard sometimes, especially if it's not what we want to hear."

I think that experience made us all closer. Penny was doing magic now, her own special kind, and Michael was helping us figure stuff out. Penny promised to study the meanings of the cards more. And Michael promised to

never forget his fire pouch.



Christmas time. I got out candle making things and made several multi-colored molded candles for gifts. Penny and I got some nice tinted paper and made calligraphy Christmas cards. She did some of her borderwork on them while I showed Michael how to make dip candles. I tried some borderwork on practice paper, but I wasn't very good yet. Michael asked what we were having for lunch just as I was bringing a tray of candles out of the oven. He laughed so hard I thought he was going to die. I explained to him about smoothing molded candles.

My parents didn't want to go to Midnight Mass this year, so Penny and Michael and I went together. It was beautiful, as always, and I felt really warm and peaceful when I crawled into bed about 2:00 in the morning.

At almost 3:00, the phone rang. I heard Dad get it, so I pulled the covers back over me.

"Search and Rescue!" he said, bursting into my room. I threw the blankets back. "You have two minutes. No pack, just swimsuit and warm clothes."

"Thanks, Dad." I was groggy.

Mom was up by now too. "Honey, do you have to go? It's Christmas morning . . ."

"Mom, someone out there is having a really lousy Christmas."

She sighed. "What do you want packed?"

"Some fruit juice or something. Cookies." I got into warm clothes and crammed my suit and towel into my daypack. Cold water on my face in the bathroom helped me wake up.

HONK, HONK.

I grabbed the food bag from my mom and flew out the door.

"Be careful, Ariel!"

"I will, Dad!"

Penny was already in the truck. "Hi, Mabel. What's up?"

"Party on a yacht. A fire started. Fires on boats are bad news." We were flying north toward a little marina where the Fire Department kept a rescue boat.

"Dispatch to Search and Rescue teams," said the radio.

"Search and Rescue Charlie team here. We're approaching Northside Marina now," Jack's voice said.

"Fireboat is on the scene, has picked up one victim. Boat is in flames. Victim relates 15 or 16 people on the boat, all swam in different directions."

"Roger, Dispatch. We'll sweep."

We roared up to the marina. The place was buzzing. I could see the Search and Rescue cars and trucks, a Fire Department car, and a Sheriff.

"Ariel, stay at the radio. Penny, grab a bundle of towels from the back." A car zoomed up and Bob hopped out as Mabel and Penny ran down to the rescue boat. He ran up to the truck.

"What's happening?"

"Hop in." I told him about the fire on the boat.

"What do we do?"

"Wait."

"Search and Rescue Charlie to Dispatch. We're leaving dock now. Give me Delta," Jack's voice said.

"Dispatch to Search and Rescue Delta team."

I had watched Mabel enough times, so I picked up the microphone. "Search and Rescue Delta team here."

"Ariel," Jack's voice said, "as soon as Mabel gets there, have her proceed to Baxter Point Road. You guys are beach pick-up for this side of the bay. We'll direct you from there."

"Roger, Charlie team."

"Search and Rescue out."

Mabel and Penny ran up and squeezed in. I gave her the message, and she started the truck. "It *would* be low tide. Those beaches out there are all mud right now. Hi, Bob. It looks like you'll see some action tonight. I hope you like goo!" She roared up the road through the darkness.

A few minutes later we screeched to a stop at the end of a dead-end road. In front of us was dark mud and darker water. "Penny, tell Dispatch we're here."

Penny picked up the microphone, pushed in the button. "Search and Rescue Delta team to Dispatch."

"Dispatch. Go ahead Delta."

"We're at Baxter Point Road."

"Roger. You copy, Charlie team?"

"Roger. We have three victims on board. Keep count for us, will you Dispatch?"

"Affirmative. One got to the beach on the west side, so that's five out of 15 or 16. Dispatch out."

"Charlie team out."

"Sign off, Penny," Mabel said.

"Delta team out," Penny transmitted.

I passed out cookies and we waited. We heard that C team picked up five more people, and Dispatch reported two more made it to the west side. The rescue boat was sweeping our side of the inlet now. One more picked up. We could see them out there part of the time, floodlights searching the water.

"Dispatch, we're going as close to the beach now as we dare," Jack's voice said.

More minutes passed. We saw the rescue boat pass our location and head north. We ate another round of cookies.

"Dispatch, I think we have a man on the beach. He's right at the water's edge. Get me Delta team."

"We copy, Charlie," Mabel answered.

"Delta, drive one mile north and give me a flare."

Mabel swung the truck around and got on the road that continued north. "Ariel, there's a signal kit in the glove box. Sky flare, but don't unscrew the cap until you're outside. As soon as I stop, hop out and send it up, nice and straight. Two-tenths more."

A moment later she stopped, Bob and I hopped out and I let the flare light up the sky.

"Delta, come back a thousand feet and get down to the beach. We think he's moving."

Back a little, then down a bumpy dirt road. It ended, we all got out, and Mabel handed us ropes and large flashlights. "Find a way to the beach!"

We scrambled around in the trees, and Bob found the way. We followed him down a little trail, and as soon as we came out of the bushes, we searched the mud with our lights.

"There!" Penny yelled, pointing a little farther south. We all ran. But we were still a hundred feet from him when the mud got so deep we couldn't move. It almost tore my boots off as I tried to pull them out.

"Damn!" Mabel said.

"Mabel, Ariel and I can get out there on our bellies," Penny said.

Mabel looked at the guy in the mud. He wasn't moving. "Okay. I can't see any other way. Get roped."

We lay down in the mud so we could get our feet out of it, then wiggled into climbing harnesses. A figure eight knot and a carabiner, and we were ready.

"Bob, take Ariel's rope. We're going to back out to solid ground while you two go in."

Penny and I started to slither along the mud, pushing with our arms. "My mom's going to *love* my clothes!" I said. Penny laughed. I looked toward the water. The tide was starting to come in, and water was splashing around the guy.

"We'd better get there soon!" Penny said.

Another 25 feet. "God, I'm cold."

We kept pushing ourselves along. We arrived at the still figure. "It's a lady!" Penny yelled.

"We've got to get her head out of the water!" I said. The tide was coming in fast. We struggled to lift her head. As soon as we did, she started coughing and sputtering. "She's breathing!"

"Get a good hold!" Mabel yelled.

Penny and I each got one shoulder, and together kept her head up. Muddy saltwater splashed all over us. "Pull!" I yelled. We were sliding on our sides. "Keep us together!"

As soon as the ground got firm under us, Bob picked up the lady and Mabel helped us up. We all staggered up the beach. Just then medics came through the trees. Bob set her down, and they took over.

"You guys okay?" Mabel asked.

We looked at each other and started laughing. We were covered with mud, even our hair. We couldn't stop laughing. Mabel and Bob joined us. I finally collected myself enough to say, "Merry Christmas!" and that started us all

laughing again.

At last we picked up our gear and laughed our way back to the truck. Mabel put blankets over the seats and around us, and we packed ourselves in.

“Dispatch, Search and Rescue Delta has one more for your count. Alive and with the medics.”

“Delta, the count is now 15, and the ship’s mate confirms 15 people were on board. Rescue complete. Thanks again. Dispatch out.”

“Delta team returning to Northside Marina. Out.”



The marina operators had coffee and donuts for everybody. The medics were getting all the victims off the rescue boat and into ambulances, and Mabel told Jack what had happened on the beach. Penny and I found a garden hose and washed the mud off, starting with our hair, laughing as we went. We helped Mabel clean the ropes and other gear, and she took us home.

Dawn light was already in the sky when I opened my front door, saw Mom and Dad sitting up waiting for me, and said in a jolly voice, “Ho, ho, ho!”



Chapter 33

We had a tradition now that Saturdays in January were candle making days. Michael and I did most of the candle making while Penny gazed at the Tarot card layout, the same one that had scared us weeks before. We talked about and thought about each part of it, and came up with more things we could learn from it. Michael thought the Grimoire was great for finished ideas, but we needed a place we could just scribble things down. We agreed, and the next Saturday he brought a little spiral notebook.

"We should keep that safe and hidden with the Grimoire," Penny asserted.

"And let's keep all the pages in it so we can go back to them if we need to," I said, finishing another tall white candle.

"My candle has a Wart!" Michael said, showing us the lump on the side of it. We all laughed.

I got out some cookies I had made, and then read a new page I was adding to the study book.

The anthropologist has always had a difficult time defining Magic, mainly because it overlaps so completely with its first cousin, Religion. When no grounds for a distinction can be made, the term religio-magical is used. All religions in the world today contain elements that can be called purely magical, and most magical systems include many purely religious concepts. The great body of religio-magical theory and practice, however, belongs to both terms. Ceremony, symbol, priesthood, creed, myth,

initiation: all these things can be found equally in religions and magical societies. The only clear distinction can be made from within an institution (and therefore non-scientifically): what we do is Religion, what they do is Magic (or vice versa). Perhaps this is just a variation on the age-old thesis: My gods are real, your gods are false . . .

Everybody thought about it.

"Is that why it doesn't matter which church we go to?" Michael asked.

"Yeah. Truth is truth. If God is real, and He doesn't change color just because you step into a different building."

"What about when we make up different Spirit names?" Penny asked.

"It doesn't matter what name you use. God doesn't care what you call Him or his Spirits. As long as it's something nice!"

"But wouldn't it be kind of weird to say Spirit of Aardvarks?" Michael asked.

"Why? God must care about aardvarks too. And He probably has some Angel or something who watches over them."

"Wow. I never thought about it that way," he said.



The Sunday before Candlemas, we all went to church with Penny's mom, and then gathered in my room. We had all our ideas down in the notebook, so we just had to agree on the finished form and do the calligraphy.

How can we help new Sprites find us and join the grove?

6 Lovers	11 Enchantress	13 Reaper
10 Wheel	9 Sage	17 Star
12 Martyr	7 Chariot	14 Alchemist

We achieved our physical training with great sacrifice, and we were victorious. In the future we must be patient and flexible with new people.

Our ideas were found by chance, but now we must use discretion. In the future, a true Teacher will be needed.

Spiritual love and the choice of white magic began the Grove. We hold spiritual power, but someday we must go through a death or transformation of something spiritual.

On Candlemas eve, we met at the park after dinner and took a long route into the Grove. It gave Michael more practice in the dark.

"I think I'd like to do my first tests as soon as the weather gets good," he said as we made our way through the woods. "I just need to get a little better at swimming and alder climbing."

"Great! Let's plan some swims in the inlet."

"Yeah. I need to get used to the cold water. *Brrr!*"

Michael brought out his recorder and played as we walked, a simple tune, like shepherds might use. Through the Hedge we crawled. It was so much fun listening to him, I led us around and about the inner woods before we climbed the hill.

"Bring your fire pouch?" Penny asked Michael with a glint in her eye.

"Yeah, but I forgot my tinder, so I'll use your hair!" he said with a grin.

Everyone laughed.

It was cold, so Michael quickly built the fire. Penny and I brought him twigs and sticks. As the flames started leaping, we warmed ourselves and Michael played.

"Do we have to do everything in the Magic Circle?" Penny asked. "It's cold over there!"

"Just the blessing of the candles."

"What's the lesson tonight?" Michael asked.

"Penny's going to tell us what happened with some spells we cast last year."

She warmed her hands. "You guys know how the earthworms came, and my mom's garden did really well. But there's more. A strange plant came up. My mom didn't pull it, she said, just because it kind of looked nice where it was. I asked her what it was, but she didn't know. Just a couple of weeks ago she remembered to tell me that she had found out. It was Vervain, Enchanter's Plant, a magical herb of protection!"

"Neat! I hope we can learn more about herbs someday," I said.

"Then there's the part about my mom. She grew all that food, so then she had to can it and freeze it and stuff. I helped a little. Since she had all that food stored away, she decided to do more cooking. We used to just eat microwaved stuff or go out for hamburgers. So since she's been cooking, and inviting her boyfriend over to eat with us, he and I have been getting along better, and he and my mom are happier. I think my mom's starting to feel like we're a family again. And she's even starting to compliment me about things I do, like Search and Rescue and stuff."

"Fantastic!" I said, remembering our spells.

"AND, she wants *you* two to come over more often, because she knows how close we all are."

We lit lots of candles around the Magic Circle and asked a blessing for the new ones. We returned to the fire pit to share bread, and then talked more about Michael's tests. There was a special warm feeling there that night, and we all held hands and laughed and talked on the way home.



Chapter 34

"You've been with us more than a year now," Sam said on the way to the March Search and Rescue meeting. "A lot of people thought you wouldn't make it. How do you feel about it?"

"I've learned a lot," I said. I was still wondering why Mabel hadn't picked us up.

"I'm glad I could help," Penny said.

I didn't know what Penny was thinking, but I was pretty sure it would be our last meeting. I just couldn't imagine that all those people would want us to be permanent members. We didn't even have *cars*.

When we got to the house where the meeting was, everyone else was already there. We sat on the floor in a corner.

"Welcome, Penny and Ariel," Jack said. "As you can see, we always meet half an hour early when we are voting on new permanent members so we can talk about them before they get here. Everyone has seen you at training meetings, Mabel has told us about your work on Delta team, and I talked about your tree rescue. A couple of people have some things they want to say to you. Jeff?"

"I guess I was jealous at first. I'm sorry. Like most people my age, I always thought of younger kids as useless. I was wrong, at least about you guys. You guys are good."

"Thanks," I said, still feeling quite vulnerable.

Penny nodded and smiled.

Then George from B team said, "I never let you know, but I was dead set against you being on the team from the beginning. I have an 11-year-old daughter, and she is useless, at least at anything that means taking responsibility. But . . ." He looked around the room. ". . . I don't see how I'd want to get along without you two on my team."

I was feeling like crying, but I held it in.

"Sam, any comments on swimming or anything?" Jack asked.

"I've only seen them in practice, but a friend of mine, Tom Miller . . ."

"You know Tom?" Penny interrupted.

"I know everyone in town who can swim worth beans. Or drink beer worth beans."

Everyone laughed. "Tom took them across the inlet in his canoe. Except, they weren't in the canoe, if you take my meaning. Four miles, with no assistance. I want them on C team."

He was embarrassing me. No one else had anything to say, so we took a break for coffee, milk, and cookies. A feeling of pride was growing inside me, but deep down I still thought it was our last meeting. Everybody settled into the living room again.

"A vote for Ariel to be a permanent member of the support team," Jack said. Everyone raised their hands. "Penny on support team." Again everyone.

Wow, we were permanent members! And we could go on helping Mabel! I was grinning from ear to ear.

"A vote for Ariel on water rescue team." All hands went up. "Penny on water rescue." All hands went up again.

I looked at Penny. We were on C team too!

"A vote for Ariel on land rescue." All hands went up. "Penny on land rescue." All hands but one went up. I could see Maxine biting her lip. Then her hand slowly went up.

"You are now permanent members of B, C, and D teams," Jack said. "Congratulations!" Everyone clapped. Some people waved victory fists for us. Penny and I hugged each other. My heart was pounding and I was close to tears. All three teams! I couldn't believe it. It was just too wonderful.

We finally settled down and the meeting switched to the training session.

It was lectures and blackboard stuff, all about map reading, and signaling, and stuff like that. During the break, Jack introduced us to Carl.

"I've worked out a plan to handle your transportation," Jack said. "Here's how it goes. Carl drives like the wind, and he's always getting to rescues before even Alpha team can get there. So we're going to harness his energy a little to help you guys out. He's on both B and C teams. If we get a call during school hours, he'll drive by your schools. Any other time, he'll drive by your houses."

"And we do mean *drive by*," Carl said. "If you aren't in the middle of the street waiting for me, I go on to the rescue."

Jack went on, "If you aren't at the expected place, then you revert to D team. Get to a phone and call Central Dispatch, tell them where you are, and Mabel will get you, if she can. That's the best we can do."

Penny and I were happy. We liked Carl. He was kind of wild, taking more risks than most people. Jack opened some cardboard boxes and showed us our receivers, big ones for home that plugged in but had batteries for during power failures, and little ones we had to carry around with us. He showed us how we had to put them into their battery chargers at night.

Penny and I were all smiles the rest of the afternoon. The training finally ended, and we all attacked the fried chicken place. A lot of people congratulated us and said they were looking forward to having us on their teams.

Carl flew us home so he would know where we lived. He came in and introduced himself to each of our parents, and told them how our transportation would work. And he told them how proud they should be to have daughters who could do the things we could do.

After he left, I hugged my mom and dad. "Thanks!" I said.



Chapter 35

"You've got to keep your kicking in rhythm with your strokes!" Penny yelled at Michael as they both grabbed the side of the pool. "If you can do that, I promise you'll be able to control your speed and go faster and faster. Your legs just keep working against your arms!"

"Michael," I said from another lane, "let your legs control the rhythm at first. Make your arms follow their beat."

Penny nodded agreement.

"Okay, I'll try it again." He started swimming. Twice on the first lap he broke his rhythm. Then it started smoothing out — two kicks to the stroke, three strokes to the breath. Three more laps and he only messed up once.

"I think I got it!" Michael said, popping up.

"You did!" Penny yelled and clapped.

I smiled at Michael.

Penny had Michael do a few laps really slow, one kick per stroke. Then faster and faster. He only broke rhythm once in a while. And he could feel how much easier it was to cover the distance when his legs and arms worked together.



We were plodding up to the three mile mark. I could tell Michael was tired. "Another one," Penny said.

"Why?" Michael gasped.

"Because all of us *can*."

I flashed her a smile. She was right — he soon got a second wind. We ran on toward the next milepost.

Four miles approached. Michael looked good.

“Go for five!” he said.

“We’re with you!” Penny said.

We ran.

Soon Michael was slowing down. I was no spring chicken. Penny looked like she could do a marathon. We called it quits at five. I wanted to hug Michael, to feel the hot sweat on his body next to mine, but I didn’t find the courage.



We each picked an alder. “We’re going up together,” I said, “ten feet at a time. As high as Michael wants to go.” Free-climbing alders was the only thing we did that almost always scraped up our hands. I think that was part of the challenge, not letting that very real pain hurt us. We used to get scraped up in the wild woods, especially in the dark when we first started, but not anymore.

“I’m ready,” Michael said.

I looked at Penny. She nodded.

“First 10 feet,” I said and started shimmying. I had a tree that would take me up about 50 feet, but I doubted I’d need it all. I looked at Michael.

“I’m good,” he said.

“To 20 feet!” I said. We always wore jackets for this to protect our arms, but our hands had to be bare. Gloves just didn’t have the right grip. I looked at Michael.

“One more maybe.”

“To 30!” I could tell he was getting winded. In the trees, no amount of rhythm could compensate for his 125 pounds. Penny and I only had to carry 75 pounds up those slender trunks. Thirty feet.

“My arms are shaking!” Michael said.

“Grip tight with your legs so your arms can rest. We’ll go down in a minute.” I knew what shaking arms meant. He still had to climb down those 30 feet, and doing it in small chunks was safer. “To 25.”

We got down safely and went to find our lunch.



As soon as we returned to school after spring vacation, Michael announced that he would do his tests the second Saturday in April. He knew we had Search and Rescue the first Saturday. I faithfully carried my receiver in my purse everyday, but each morning I said a silent prayer that it wouldn't go off at school. Everyone knew I could do all kinds of physical things. They knew I had rescued a little boy from a tree, but I hadn't really told them about Search and Rescue.

The gym teachers knew because I kept my purse in their office during class so someone would hear the receiver if it went off.

But I wasn't so lucky. Wednesday, March 30. Math class. An incredible beeping noise burst from my purse. Then three shrill tones. "Search and Rescue Alpha team, radio Central Dispatch. All other teams stand by." I turned red. It didn't even have a volume control. All the kids were looking at me.

"Ariel," the teacher said, "I know about that, but maybe you should explain it to the class."

I didn't want to. I buried my head in my hands, I was so embarrassed. "Tell them, Ariel," a little voice inside me said. I knew I should. I took some deep breaths, then looked at them. I was sure my face was still red.

"Alpha team is just the three leaders," I started. "Often they look into the situation before the other teams are called."

"What are the other teams?" a guy asked.

I told them what each team did.

"Which one are you on?" a girl asked.

"Um . . . I'm pretty new, so I go wherever I'm needed."

"What's going to happen now?" another guy asked.

"The leaders are talking to Central Dispatch about it, and probably to the Sheriff or firemen or whoever knows about it, and they're trying to decide if a rescue team is needed or not."

"I thought firemen rescued people," a girl said.

"They do, but they're not trained for wilderness or water rescue. We work with them. Sometimes they just need more people than they have."

"Do you get paid?"

"No. It's just volunteer. But we get free training, and a free dinner at our meetings, and some free equipment. And everything we need during rescues is provided."

"How often do you do it?"

"Go out on rescues? My first year there were three. The last one happened at 3:00 in the morning on Christmas!"

"I saw that!" a girl said. "I live out near Northside Marina, and there were ambulances and everything! Were you there?"

"Yeah. There and on the beach north of there."

"What did you do?" she asked.

I chuckled at the memory. "It was low tide. A lady swam from the burning boat and just made it to the mud. The rescue boat directed us — I was on the support team then — and we had to slide through the mud to get to her. Then we were pulled back up the beach with ropes. We laughed all the way home because we were so muddy!"

"Yuk! I'd never do that!" the girl said.

"You'd let the person die, I suppose!" a boy confronted her.

"You know," I stepped in, "I felt like she did until I started doing things that took me near death. You guys know the kinds of things I do. That taught me what life was all about."

Just then the receiver went off again. "Search and Rescue teams, all clear."

"When will you learn what happened?"

"We meet once a month for training. I'll hear then."

We finally went back to the math lesson. Teaching, I realized again, was hard.



I got lots of questions about Search and Rescue after that, even from people I'd never talked to before. Most of the questions were sincere. The one I liked most was if I was the youngest person on the team. I could truthfully say that I wasn't.

Michael walked me home a couple of days later. We weren't really talking about much. My hand brushed by his once, and I caught myself imagining holding hands with him, but I didn't find the courage to make it happen.



Chapter 36

Penny and I carried the ropes, swimsuits, and lunches. It was a cool but nice day, and new pale green leaves were everywhere. Penny and I had taught Michael everything we could about the Earth, Air, Fire, and Water skills. He looked ready.

Penny and I knew so well what he was feeling as he looked up into the big maple tree, rope over his shoulder. "It's nice to know you guys know first aid and everything." He started climbing.

"That's no substitute for your own powers," I said.

He smiled down at me.

Michael didn't have that spidery, at-home look in the trees, but he could climb. Down came the rope. Penny and I checked the length and he tied it off. Down he came with a smile on his face. "First swing is for my tree-teacher, Ariel," he said, bringing up the puller rope.

It was a fun 45 or 50 foot swing. I was proud of Michael. I played, holding on with my hands and swinging my legs out.

Penny flew, and then Michael.

I knew climbing up the rope was hard for him.. He stopped twice on the way up, but we didn't say a word.

"I think I'll do my woods run next," he called down to us. "My arms need a break."

A few minutes later, we left him at Carter Road and watched him head into the wilds.

"Have you ever been in love, Penny?" I asked as we rode around to meet Michael.

"Not really. Are you?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure what I feel or what I want."

"That guy I kissed at the State Park, it was exciting, but I don't think I'd call it love."

I didn't know what else to say about it. We perched on a picnic table, and soon Michael came trotting out of the woods.

"That part, I'm good at," he said.

"You're good at all of it!" I said.

He rested and we ate some cookies. "What do you want to do next?" Penny asked.

"Alder. Forty feet."

"Wow!"

"And then fire and lunch."

We walked over to the alder grove near the playground. Michael picked out a fairly slim one, looked at me, and started up. And he didn't stop every 10 feet to rest.

"How high?" he said while still climbing.

"Thirty."

"How high?" a few moments later.

"Forty-five!"

He kept going a few more feet.

"Fifty!"

"I knew I had to go straight up," he called to us. "When I stop, my arms get too tired to go on."

"It's different for everyone," I yelled up to him.

"My arms are shaking, I'd better come down." He started climbing down.

Something was wrong. I could feel in my stomach that something was wrong. He started slipping. "Use your feet, damn it, Michael!" I started climbing the tree as fast as I could. Tears threatened to burst from my eyes.

"He stopped at 40. No, he's sliding again!" I could hear Penny say.

"My hands are bleeding!" Michael screamed.

He was sliding toward me fast. I kept climbing. Hang on, Michael! I held

on with only my legs, let him slide right into me, then pinned him to the tree. He was crying and his whole body was shaking.

“My hands are all torn up!” he sobbed.

“I’ve got you, Michael. We won’t fall.”

He was holding his hands out from the tree now, and I could see blood dripping from them. “How high are we?” I called down to Penny.

“About 30. What can I do?”

“I don’t know yet.”

I had to do something. I couldn’t hold him up there until his hands healed. “Michael, let’s go down together now, okay?”

“What’s the use? I’ve failed! If you help me down, I’ve failed.” He started crying again.

“Michael?”

He tried to collect himself. “What?”

I think I understood what he needed. “Do you want to continue down on your own?”

He was silent.

“Your hands are scraped, but it isn’t deep. I have the salve in my pack. Do you want to finish on your own?”

A moment later he said, “Yeah.”

“Tell me when you’re rested enough.”

“What’s happening?” Penny called up.

“He’s okay. I’ll be right down.”

After a few more moments of slow breathing, he said, “I think I’m okay now. Ariel? Thanks.”

“Have you got the tree?”

“Ouch! Yeah. I’ll use my feet more.”

I started moving down. “You’re on your own.” I climbed down the tree.

“Is he okay?” Penny asked me.

“No. But he wants to finish on his own. I can’t take that away from him.”

Michael moved down very slowly. He was holding with his arms more than his hands. Twenty feet. He did use his legs more — he had to. I held Penny’s hand. He kept coming. Ten feet. Slowly, slowly. We helped him to the ground. He looked at me.

"You did it, on your own," I said. Tears were in my eyes. I wanted to put my arms around him, but I wasn't sure if he wanted me to. A moment later, we turned and followed Penny to the picnic area.

I carefully cleaned his hands under a stream of cold water at the drinking fountain, making sure there was no dirt or splinters anywhere. Penny got our lunches out. He carefully patted his hands dry on his towel. "Let them air-dry a few minutes, and pat any blood that starts. I'll get out the goldenseal salve." I had kept it in my daypack for a year now, and we had used it several times. I carefully put it all over Michael's palms.

"It feels good. They don't sting anymore. I've been thinking about it. The only thing I still have to do that will be hard because of my hands is making a fire. But I'm going to do it!"

"I believe you."

"Are you guys going to eat or what?" Penny said, mouth full.

Michael and I went over to the table. We shared food and had quite a feast.

"You're really brave," Penny said to Michael. "I would have been scared out of my mind if I had slipped while climbing. I probably would have just fallen."

He was starting to smile. His hands were raw meat, but he had wanted to finish so badly. I could understand.

"Would you open my fire pouch? I'm going to do it now before my hands swell up or anything."

"I'll get twigs. We can make smores!" Penny said.

I spread Michael's tinder out on the concrete edge of the barbeque. Using fingertips, he laid it out. Holding the flint and steel hurt his hands, but he did it. A spark. Another. The third spark took, and he bent down to puff it into flame. It went out. I thought he was going to cry, but he picked up the flint and tried again. A spark. It took and he puffed. A flame!

"First smore is for the fire-maker!" Penny said.

Michael took twigs, then sticks, and built up the fire. When it was blazing, I dabbed some more salve on a few places. We roasted marshmallows, made smores and talked for a long time. Michael said he was thinking of getting a job, but he wasn't sure what he wanted to do. Penny and I told him about our

Search and Rescue receivers going off at school. No one said anything else about alder climbing.

He held his bicycle handlebars mostly with his wrists on the way to our swimming beach. He went into the bushes and changed into his trunks, and then I sat down with him. "A nice thick coating of salve will protect your hands from the water. Try not to rub it off."

His tanned body looked so nice. I was feeling that tingly feeling inside again.

We wished him luck and he got into the water. Penny and I got into our suits just in case. Swimming was the last dangerous test — hardly anything could happen running. We saw him rest about halfway to the buoy, then again when he got there.

"He's on his way back!" I said.

"He's very tired, I can tell," Penny said. "The alder shook him up."

"Yeah."

He floated and rested three times on the way back. As he neared the shore, we were bouncing up and down and cheering for him. He pulled himself onto the beach and lay there breathing, but there was a smile on his face.

After he had rested and changed, I put salve on his hands again. The jar was almost empty. We rode slowly back to the park, and then just walked around awhile talking about movies and anything that came to mind. When he was ready, he led us down to the road.

"You said you found your limits swimming, Ariel. And you found yours running, Penny. I found mine in that alder tree. Don't expect five miles out of me today!"

He started running. We hopped on our bikes and rode along with him. I was glad when he turned around at one mile.

As he loped back into the park and slowed to a walk, we carefully put our arms around him.

"Michael, you are a tested Wood Sprite now, master of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water!" Penny said.

"And you are our brother forever!"



Chapter 37

There was a gleam in Michael's eyes whenever we were together that hadn't been there before. I think he was proud to be a Wood Sprite. I knew that a lot of people at school were starting to admire him because of his strength and the things he could do. His hands healed fast, but he would keep a few little scars from his tests.

Light spring rains fell, and we gathered at Penny's house to plan our Beltane celebration.

"My mom's doing an even bigger garden this year," Penny said. "She's already planted some of the seeds, but we can do a spell for the whole garden anyway, can't we?"

"Sure. Bring what seeds you can. You want to do it this time?"

"Uh . . . okay."

"I have something," Michael said. "If you guys think it's okay. I was wondering if maybe Penny could do a Tarot reading for me. I have about three job possibilities and I can't decide about them. What do you think, could we do something like that?"

"Sounds like I'm going to be busy on Beltane!" Penny said.

"I'm doing the lesson, at least!" I said.

"But is it okay to do?" Michael insisted.

We thought about it. "I think so," I said. "You'll get paid, but that's reward for your work, not for the magic."

"I agree," Penny said. "I'm better prepared now, too."

"I have an idea for something new," I said.

"What?"

"Why don't we eat at the Grove? A potluck!"

"Yeah!" Penny said.



Beltane eve was cloudy and warm. It was a Saturday, but we didn't get together until late afternoon because we all had things to get ready. I read a little more to prepare for the lesson, and then worked on my potluck dish — noodles with sauce and sliced wieners. It would be easy to reheat over the fire.

Michael came over about 4:00. "No music tonight. My hands aren't ready for it."

"Did you get that sheet music you wanted?"

"Yeah! It looks really neat. I can't wait to play it. I brought cans of juice and all kinds of cookies."

We rode over to Penny's house, and she was ready with potato salad. As soon as we got to the picnic area, we got into our cloaks and checked over our supplies.

"Wait a minute!" I said. "Did anyone bring plates and silverware?"

Dead silence.

"I've got a serving spoon in my salad someone can use," Penny said.

"I've got my Athame."

"Come on, sissies, we'll live!" Michael said.

We all laughed at our situation and headed for the Grove. For the first time, we had daypacks over our cloaks. Noodles and wieners just *couldn't* go in pockets.

As we walked through the woods, Penny said, "My mom's got tons of old plastic dishes and stuff. I could bring a set for each of us to keep in the hollow."

"Great idea! Plates, cups, and plastic silverware. We can wash them at the picnic area."

"I've got a big camping pot we can keep here," Michael said. "We could cook things if we needed to."

"Or make popcorn!" Penny said.

"Yum!" Michael seconded the idea.



"We dedicate this Grove as a place of worship and magic, where Wood Sprites and good Spirits are welcome. Only white magic is done here. Only love and caring belong here."

The sun hadn't set yet. Penny built a fire and we passed around the bowl of potato salad and our one spoon. As soon as the main dish was hot, we took turns eating the noodles with the spoon and spearing wieners with the Athame. It was fun, and it made me realize that we couldn't do the things we did without sharing germs.

Just after sunset, we all lit candles from the fire and entered the Magic Circle. I collected my thoughts for the lesson.

"The very first religion was fear of ghosts and superstition. People didn't really know anything about God or Spirits, so they just made things up to try and explain things. Most of the things they made up were pretty simple and selfish. But once in a while God spoke to the people."

"Prophets and people like that?" Michael asked.

"Yeah. So after people learned a little bit, they invented magic. Life was hard. They wanted to talk to God and his Spirits and ask for favors."

"How old is magic?" Penny asked.

"No one knows. Prehistoric, at least the simple stuff."

"How old is history?" Michael asked.

I had to think about that one. "People have been keeping records for about 6000 years, I think. In some places, but not everywhere. Anyway, God kept talking to people. Moses, Jesus, Muhammad. People invented religions so they could all agree on how to talk to God and the Spirits. Religions use a mixture of things, some of them magical, some of them just customs."

"Are there white and black religions?" Penny asked.

I thought about it. "I don't know, Penny."

"Why do some people hate magic?" Michael asked.

"Probably because they don't understand it. Or because they think it's all black."

"Maybe some of them hate it because of things in the Bible that say Witches and stuff are bad," Penny said.

"That too."

"Are witches bad?" Michael asked.

"Are people bad?" I asked him back.

"Some are. Okay, I get it. It depends on if what they do is black or white magic, or whatever they do."

I closed my eyes as a sign that it was time for us to ponder and pray about what we had heard. Are there black and white religions, God? Are there selfish or hurtful religions? I thought of the Crusades for a moment. Could a religion be bad, God? Not the whole thing but just some little parts of it? I understand. "God, please hear our prayers."

I moved to let Penny get in front of the altar. She brought out a little green candle, lit it, and set the packets of seeds on the altar. "Spirit of Green Plants, I am burning this candle of fertility in hopes that you will watch over these seeds, and the garden they will grow in, and the plants that are already there. Last year you sent a vervain to my mom's garden for protection. This year, I will plant one . . . and . . . *I* will watch over the garden, too."

Penny looked a little unnerved for a moment, and sat there looking at the green candle. I don't think she had intended to say that last part. I understood. I already knew how inspiration could come unexpectedly while doing a spell.

She blew out the candle and lit a purple one. I opened the notebook to record the reading, and Penny got the 22 major Tarot cards ready.

"Michael, close your eyes and think of the 3 paths that lie before you. Take the cards and shuffle them as you think about the jobs." She handed him the cards. "Spirit of Counsel, please help me to give Michael the knowledge you think he should have to make his decision." Then she just sat quietly as Michael mixed the cards.

"Is this enough?"

"If you feel finished."

He handed back the cards.

"Picture the first path, Michael. This is the near future on that path, this is the far future." She laid down two cards, face down. "Picture the second path." She laid down two more cards. "And picture the third path."

"Should I tell you what each path is?"

"Not yet. Let me read the cards a little first. The first path — you know what it is — begins with . . . sacrifice in the near future, and later . . . deception." Penny gave Michael a moment to think.

"The second path holds victory and success, and later . . . a catastrophe or accident." She looked at Michael. He looked at the cards.

"The third path begins with . . . folly. You will be, or seem to be, a fool. And later . . . attainment. You will become the Adept, the master."

We were all silent as I finished my notes. A breeze tickled the treetops above us. The flame atop the purple candle danced.

"The first path is a real wage-earning job, but it's as dead-end as they come. Janitor in a daycare center. Maybe the deception is that it would be dead-end."

"Or maybe you would work a month and then they wouldn't pay you," I suggested. "That would account for the sacrifice, too."

"Hmmm. The second one is a machinist's apprentice. An accident?"

Nobody said anything about that one.

"The third one is a baker's apprentice."

"Michael, remember how worried you were what people would think when you started doing things with us?" I asked.

"Yeah . . ."

"Look at the second and third paths. Machinist. Victory. All the guys would look up to you. Baker. The Fool. Some people would laugh at you."

"But look at the second card," Penny said. "Accident or attainment?"

Michael was silent for a minute. "Do you have it all written down, Ariel?"

"Yep."

"Thanks, Penny. I'll have to think about it."

Penny picked up the cards and put the little box into her cloak. Michael looked thoughtful.

We asked a blessing for all gardens and fields and cattle everywhere, and I broke the bread to share. We sat by the fire awhile, but Michael was quiet the rest of the evening. Sometimes he would look at the notes I had made. Sometimes he would just gaze into the fire.

Penny and I let him be.



Chapter 38

"It's hard to believe, Penny, that I can stand on this beach and look across at the other side, four miles away, and know in my heart that I could swim across if I wanted to."

"You want to do it without the canoe sometime?"

"Sure. Maybe we could get one of our parents to meet us on the other side."

"Let's do it as soon as the weather gets warmer," Penny said.

"Okay. Let's get wet right now!"

We sprinted out to the channel buoy together and then just splashed around.

"Do you think Michael's going to do stuff with us again?" Penny asked, floating on her back.

"Yeah. When he decides about his jobs."

We swam back and rode to Penny's house to look at old dishes and stuff.



May was almost over, and I was getting lonely at school. Michael was still lost in himself. I had started eating lunch with a girl I knew. She was athletic, but not at all like a Sprite. I'm not sure why, but none of the athletic people at school ever seemed like Sprites to me. They were too into their athletic greatness, I guess. But at least she was friendly, so we hung out sometimes.

"How come you never join a team or anything, Ariel?" she asked me one day.

"I don't know. I like to do things with just a couple of friends. If I was on a team, I wouldn't have time to see them very much."

"A lot of the teams could use you. What would you do if your Search and Rescue thing went off right now?"

"A guy who drives like a devil would fly by the school in about 30 seconds, and I'd be out in the street to meet him."

"How old is he?"

"About 40."

"Oh. Can you believe that guy with glasses in Social Studies asked me out?"

"I think he's nice."

"He's too weird! I've gotta go. See you later, Ariel."

I went to class with the feeling she hadn't understood anything I'd said. Not really understood.



When I got out of my last class that day, there was a smiling eighth grader waiting for me.

"Michael!"

"You are looking at a baker's apprentice!" he said.

"You decided!" I wanted to wrap my arms around him, but stopped myself because it might embarrass him.

"I know I was pretty gone for a couple of weeks there. I had to make my own decision."

"I figured you needed some space. Want to go climbing with me and Penny?"

"Sure! But I have to be careful with my hands."

I nodded that I understood.

We ran to Penny's house, as best we could with our books, and her mom made snacks for us. "You should see things popping up in my garden! And Penny insisted we plant a vervain in the middle of it all. I wonder if that has something to do with companion planting."

The sun was out, so we walked to the park. "I realized something I did wrong," Penny said as we walked, looking at Michael. "I shouldn't have let you tell us which job was which. Because we knew, you might think we'd be

mad if you picked one that was different from what the Tarot cards said.”

“Good thinking, Penny,” I said. “That would only make it harder for him to choose.”

“I knew you guys would still be my friends, no matter what I did. The hardest part was accepting what I knew even before you read the cards — people would laugh if I became a baker’s apprentice. But I did it!”

“What will you do?” I asked.

“I’ll work from 3:00 to 7:00 a.m.”

“Wow!” Penny said.

“I don’t get paid anything for the first year. Well, I sort of do. I get a big breakfast. The apprenticeship laws say you get a meal every four hours.”

“Doughnuts for breakfast every morning?” Penny asked with a grin.

“They have deli sandwiches, too. What really made me decide was how nice the people are. Frank’s the master baker, and there are two journeymen, Beth and Issa. Issa’s really nice. He’s 18, and he just finished being an apprentice. I think he’s Jewish.”

“How old is Beth?” I asked.

“She’s about 30. I’m really glad my hands healed fast, or I wouldn’t have gotten it. They had me knead some dough while we talked. Everyone there is constantly chatting about anything and everything, *while* working.”

We climbed into a maple tree and sat in the branches while Michael told us more about it. He was really excited about learning to make pastries and stuff. He said he would be working six days a week, so he couldn’t stay out late very often.

I was glad Beth was a lot older.



Chapter 39

Penny and I got a real treat in June. The Search and Rescue training was at the Coast Guard base, and we learned how to get in and out of big helicopters, how to look for wrecks and people on the ground, and how to rappel down two or three hundred feet into the woods where the helicopter couldn't land. Of course, after that we had to climb up a rope ladder to get back into the chopper. But we had fun, and ate lots of fish and chips at dinner.



"What would you guys say if I told you I had found another Sprite?" Michael asked as we all sat in my room one evening.

"Neat!" Penny said. "Who?"

Michael looked at me with a little worry. I smiled and he relaxed.

"Issa at the bakery! I haven't told him anything, don't worry. But we got talking about the Bible while we were kneading bread dough, and he said he thought God had hidden all kinds of magical signs and symbols in it. What should I do?"

I looked at Penny. "Invite him to have a picnic with us at the park."

"His day off is Saturday. That's because he's Jewish. He told me their Sabbath is from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday."

"If he's super-orthodox Jewish, he won't do anything on the Sabbath except study the scriptures," I said.

"I don't think he is," Michael said.

"Where does he go to school?" Penny asked.

"At the high school. He's just about to graduate. He's a journeyman now, so he's going to work at the bakery part time and also at one of those grocery stores that bake their own stuff. But I think he said he wants to take a couple of college classes next year."



Because of his graduation, Issa couldn't have a picnic with us until two Saturdays later. That was Penny's birthday too, so we planned all kinds of things to do. Penny brought the rope, Michael brought drinks and chips and stuff, and I brought hot dogs and cookies. As we waited for Issa, I imagined him having a scraggly beard and driving a car about a hundred years old.

A guy that looked about 16 or 17 rode up on a ten-speed. He smiled when he saw Michael. He had wavy dark brown hair.

"Did you bring it?" Michael asked him.

"Yes," he said and smiled. He opened his daypack and brought out a little white box. I could see Michael holding in a grin. He opened it, and inside was a big chocolate creampuff with one birthday candle stuck in the middle. He dug matches out of his pack and lit the candle.

"Wow!" Penny said. "Thanks!"

"How old are you?" Issa asked.

"Eleven."

"That's a nice age."

Penny blew out the candle, took a big bite of the creampuff, and tore off chunks for each of us. I got the filling all over my fingers.

We got out our food and Michael started making a fire. Penny and I went into the trees to get wood, and Issa watched what Michael was doing. When we got back, Michael had a little blaze going with some twigs that were already there. Issa looked amazed.

"They taught me," Michael said, pointing at us.

Issa didn't say anything, but he smiled at us. He brought bagels out of his pack, sliced them with his pocket knife, and spread cream cheese on them. From another package he took thin strips of smoked salmon and laid them on top.

"Lox!" Penny said. "I love it!"

Michael had the fire going, so I put hot dogs on the grill. Issa fixed bagels for everyone, and Penny opened the hot dog buns.

"You're on the Search and Rescue team?" Issa asked.

Penny grinned and pulled her receiver out of her pack for a moment.

"I'm honored to know you two. Penny and . . . Ariel, right?"

"Right," I said. "I'm 12, but I'll be 13 soon."

"Jewish kids become adults at 13."

We opened cans of pop and put stuff on our hot dogs.

"You had matches. Do you smoke?" Penny asked Issa.

"No way. But I light lots of candles. They represent Spirit, and the rising smoke represents our prayers going up to God."

"When are you going to open those potato chips, Michael?" I hinted.

He ripped open the bag, and they went all over the table. We all laughed and grabbed at them. Issa was laughing too. He was quiet but fun to be with. We finished our picnic and headed for the cliffs.

"Where are we going?" Issa asked.

"You'll see!" Michael said.

"Is Issa your whole name?" I asked as we started along the cliff path.

"It's short for Isaiah. At home I'm called Yeshaya."

Penny and Michael picked out a nice tree. Issa watched with wide eyes as I took the rope and scrambled into the branches. I made a swing and came down. "Who wants to fly?"

"Me!" Michael said. He took off, whooping and laughing.

"Is it fun?" Issa asked.

"You'll have to decide!" Penny said. He smiled at her. Michael came back up and Penny flew. Issa watched silently. Penny finished and I hopped on.

A new Sprite? The thought was exciting. Each person brought something new to the Grove. Penny brought the Tarot. Michael brought music. I wonder what Issa will bring? I dropped off and climbed back up the slope, trailing the puller rope behind me.

"Issa, you want to?" Michael asked him.

"It looks like fun. How do I do it?"

Michael looked at me. "Ariel's the Master of Trees."

"Trust your hands, Issa. They keep you on the swing. Feet are optional,

and can do lots of different things, as you saw.”

“Like this?”

“Higher on the rope. Yeah.”

Issa flew into the air. “What do I do with my feet?”

Penny and I couldn’t help but giggle. He was too funny.

Michael called to him, “You can put them in the loop if you want to!”

He swung without saying much, but I could see a smile on his face. I winked at Penny.



Issa had strong arms, and he climbed down and dropped off without any problem.

Michael was in a really good mood. He swung again, then climbed up the rope, only stopping once. I think he was really happy he had found a new Sprite possibility. After Michael brought the rope down, we all walked around together.

“Issa, what was that thing you told me about the Bible, something about magic?” Michael asked him.

“I believe magic is real. The Bible is full of it. But there just isn’t anybody around who does it anymore because Christians decided in the Middle Ages that only the Devil does magic. If you look at the Devil legends, you find that he wasn’t a worker of magic, he was an Angel or Spirit who failed to understand God.”



Toward evening, Issa left and the three of us went to Penny’s house. Her mom was making a special birthday dinner. We went out into the garden.

“I was so tempted to tell him we did magic!” I said.

“Me too!” Penny agreed.

“You think we have a new Sprite?” Michael asked.

“As good as he sounds, let’s do things with him a few more times before we tell him.”



Chapter 40

The next time we got together with Issa, we went running. He went more than two miles before he got tired. We showed him the spring near the picnic area, and we all took drinks of the cold, clean water. We talked about religion, and we told him we all went to church, but we didn't think it mattered what religion you were. He was surprised we said that, but he agreed.

About a week after that, we all met at the college pool to go swimming. Issa could swim okay, but he didn't seem to believe that Penny was our Master of Water until some of the college swim team members asked her to swim with them and help them with their rhythm. He apologized. We talked about physical skills, and Issa thought they were important to knowing God. We agreed with him.

One day my mom invited all us friends over to dinner. I told her we had a new friend, and she was glad. I think she expected a girl my age. But it was fun and my parents liked Issa. After dinner we played a game and Michael tooted on his recorder, trying to get back into practice. Issa told us about the different books the Jews used, and how Hebrew was supposed to be a magical alphabet. Penny asked him if he had a girlfriend. He didn't.



"Mom and Dad," I said at dinner the following week, "Penny and I want to do a swim. Could you help us with transportation? We could make a picnic out of it."

"We don't have anything planned for Saturday, do we, Honey?"

"Nope," Dad said. "Where?"

I got out my county map. "The picnic will be here. It's a nice little beach. That will be after we swim, of course. We'll meet you there, we can have a picnic, and then come home."

"Okay. I'll get food ready. Is noon okay?"

"Perfect. Thanks, Mom!"



Penny came over Saturday morning while I was still cleaning the horse stall, so she brushed Tara while I finished, then we got ready to go.

"Stall's as clean as the hospital, Mom. We're heading out. The map and our receivers are on the kitchen table. We'll meet you there at noon."

"Have fun, you two!"

We both rode out to the swimming beach on my bicycle.

"Did they really think it was okay, or did you fudge?" Penny asked.

"I fudged. They know they're meeting us after a swim. I just didn't scream that we're crossing the inlet. But they know we swim long distances. And they know I'm on the water rescue team. What else can I do?"

"Yeah. I just hope they don't ground you for a hundred years."

I chuckled. "What do you think about Issa?" I asked.

"I like him. Maybe we can decide for sure at Lammas. He has to sign the Pact before he can come to the Grove, right?"

"Long before! Is it time to swim?" I asked.

"I didn't bring my watch. You feel ready?"

"Five strokes, slow pace. Last year I had to go to three strokes at about two and a half miles."

"No canoe. We watch each other, right?" Penny said.

"As long as we're Wood Sprites!"

We got in the water and started swimming. It felt a little strange, at first, not having the canoe around. We passed the buoy and headed into open water at a steady pace.

I think it was a little choppiest than last year. I could see Penny near me. There was no one to call off the miles, so I just had to trust my body. I swam until I knew I needed more air, then came up treading water for a good look. I could see the pattern of trees ahead of us that marked our destination. Penny

came up too.

"Halfway, I think. Still five strokes?"

"Good," she said.

We started swimming again. I was okay for a while, but then my arms started to get heavy. I pushed a little farther and then turned over to float. Penny turned over with me.

"Heavy arms," I said.

"Right."

After a minute I started swimming again. I saw Penny start too. I felt much better, and had a good five-stroke rhythm again. I could feel the water flow by under me. I was in good shape for several minutes.

Heavy arms and a little light-headed. I turned over to float. Penny joined me.

"Three quarters?" she wondered.

"About."

I kicked lightly and breathed to recharge my energy and rest my arms. I realized I was hungry enough to eat a bear. After a minute or so, I started swimming again. I took it easy, three strokes per breath. I knew we were close, and I knew I was tired. Steady rhythm, Ariel. Do it right. Conserve energy. Only a quarter mile to go maybe. My arms are a little heavy. Just a little more, Ariel. Rhythm. Is that the bottom? Take me in, arms. The beach!

We crawled onto the sand and gravel. I looked around as soon as the water was out of my eyes, and could see my mom and dad running up the beach toward us. I wanted to stand up to greet them, but I was too exhausted, so I just lay beside Penny in the sand.

They knelt down beside me. I smiled up at my mom. There were tears in her eyes.

"Why are you crying, Mom?"

"Because . . . because . . ."

I knew she was fighting the temptation to say something negative, like why didn't you tell us, or something like that. Please be proud of me, Mom.

"Because I have an amazing daughter."

"Thanks, Mom!" I turned to Penny. "Ready to walk?"

"Sure. I'm starved!"

"We brought lots of goodies!" Dad said.

Penny and I got up and walked down the beach with my parents. I was proud of my mom. It must be hard not to worry.

"How far is it across?" Dad asked.

"Four miles. I was better at it last year."

My mom looked at me with surprise and shock in her eyes, but caught herself. "Well . . . you're not as streamlined as you were a year ago."

"You mean I'm getting fat?"

"No, you're just growing up. You're becoming a young lady."

Her words hit me like a hammer. I guess I knew I was entering puberty, but I didn't want to admit it to myself. It meant too many things that I wasn't sure I was ready for. Now that she had said it, I couldn't put it out of my mind. It meant that I would have to work harder at physical training, like Michael had to. It meant I couldn't torpedo through the water like Penny did. It meant all kinds of stuff about boys. I tried not to think about it.

We got to the place where my parents had the picnic ready. There was fried chicken, salad, fresh biscuits, and cold milk . . . yum! My dad asked what it was like swimming that far. At first I wasn't sure what to say. Then it struck me that maybe he wasn't just parenting.

"You really want to know? I mean, you're really interested?"

"I sure am. I've never swam more than a mile."

I looked at Penny. Her mouth was full of fried chicken. "Well, we don't sprint. We use a steady rhythm, starting out at five strokes per breath . . ." I didn't go into the gory details about getting light-headed and floating above the water and all that. I didn't want to scare my mom. As I was talking, I realized something.

"Penny, remember when I first stopped and treaded water? That was where I blew it. I forgot to float and really rest. That's why I had to stop again so soon!"

"I remember," Penny said. "I forgot too, and treading water doesn't let us rest at all."

Me and my parents talked some more. After a while I noticed that Penny was sitting on a rock near the water looking across the inlet. I went over and sat down with her. "Penny, you've always stopped for me when I get tired.

Would you like it if me and Michael borrowed Tom's canoe sometime so you can swim it by yourself?"

"Would you, Ariel?!"

"Sure. I know my limits. You should have a chance to find yours."

"Thanks!"



Chapter 41

While the night dew was still on the grass, we finished breakfast and took our baskets out into the cool morning: air. This was Michael's first Lammass, and even though he had just gotten off work, he was in a happy mood. I wished I could say that about Penny.

We silently gathered vegetables, fruit, and flowers before walking to the Grove. Michael made a small fire and I gave the dedication. Michael and I didn't yet know why Penny looked so sad, but we caught her mood.

I began the lesson, reading from a little book.

The First Basic Principle of Magic. Magic follows the laws of Nature. The good Magus never asks for things that are absurd in the eyes of Nature. Work with Nature when ever you can, poor Initiate. This is called Science, and is a part of magic. Use it wisely. Only God can override this basic truth, and He only does so for good reasons.

No one was in the mood to ask questions. I wasn't in the mood to try to answer them. I closed my eyes. We sat quietly for a few minutes, Penny staring at the ground. Then a wonderful thing happened. A low humming tone crept into the silence, than danced up to a happy trill. Michael had brought out his recorder and was playing his new music! It was like birds twittering and swooping, or Fairies dancing and playing. I didn't open my eyes at first, but I could feel a smile on my face. Some low notes were like

drums beating. It felt like the whole forest had come alive through Michael's recorder.

I opened my eyes. Penny was smiling. But she was crying too. I snuggled close to her and wrapped my arms around my best friend. The music ended in a twittering that got slower and slower and faded away, as if it had gone to sleep.

In the silence that followed, Penny rubbed her eyes and said, "I have a spell to cast." Tears were still on her face as she went up to the altar on her knees and brought out a blue candle. "There's a girl in my class who was in a car accident two days ago. She's my best friend except for you guys. I'm going to light this candle and ask all the Spirits to help her get better. She's really neat. Her dog was hurt too, so I'm lighting a brown candle for him." She lit the brown candle, and then brought out a necklace with some shells on it and put it on the altar. "I'm going to visit her in the hospital today, and I want to give her this, and I want it to have lots of magic to help her get better."

Penny fell silent and just looked at the candles. I knew what she was doing because I had done it — asking and begging and pleading and willing the magic to work, trying to pour out her own strength into the spell. Michael started playing a quiet little tune. After a couple of minutes she put the shell necklace away and blew out the candles.

I picked up the basket of flowers, and Michael got the fruits and vegetables. I started passing flowers to both Penny and Michael, and he started giving me vegetables. We kept passing them back and forth around the circle, and we started laughing. Even Penny. We passed her squash and flowers and strawberries and things so fast she didn't know what to do with it all, so she began to pile it around the altar.

Then Michael brought a little bag out of his cloak. "After you told me the story of Lammas, I asked Frank how I could tell which year a sack of flour was from. He showed me the codes on the bags. I watched, and the first bag that came in that was from this year, I opened and saved out a cup of flour. Then this morning I made this little loaf from it."

"Wow!" Penny took the tiny loaf of bread and set it on the altar. "That's wonderful, Michael!"

"Spirits," Michael said, "please accept this little gift from me, and help

Penny's friend to get better."

I had an idea. "As we share the bread, lets think about our new friend, Issa." Michael broke the bread and we munched in silence. It tasted fresh and nutty, almost still warm. I remembered all the times we had been with Issa, and all the things he had said. After a while Michael broke the silence.

"I think he would make a good Wood Sprite, and we should tell him we do magic."

Penny was looking sad again — I think she was worried about her friend. She wiped her eyes and said, "What will he do? I mean I'm kind of Ariel's assistant, and I'm the swimming and running teacher, and I read Tarot. Michael is the bard and he's just about the best at fire making now, and he's in charge of the bread . . ."

"He knows all about Jewish stuff, and he says there's a lot of magic in it," Michael said.

"Maybe we'll just have to wait and see," I said. "Maybe he won't know what he's best at until he does it with us for a while."

"We need to make sure he understands exactly *what* kind of magic we do — white!" Michael said.

"Yeah, and if there's anything that isn't white about Jewish magic, we don't do it!" Penny said.

"It sounds like he wants to do magic," I said.

"But he has to sign the Pact before he can do magic with us," Michael said.

"And do the training," Penny said. "I know we have to be flexible, but it looks like he can do it all."

I nodded.

We took the vegetables to the little house on Carter Road, and Penny took the flowers to give to her friend in the hospital. Michael called Issa and arranged for him to meet us at the park the next afternoon.



We lay in the grass on one side of the playground, all our faces toward the center of the circle. Some kids were on the swings and some teenagers were throwing a Frisbee. Penny was talking.

"... and we have a secret Grove where we do our magic, but only white magic is done there, and only good Spirits are welcome. Anyone who brings

evil or selfishness there is in trouble. Because we do most of our training in woods and trees, and being quick and quiet is important to us, we call ourselves Wood Sprites.”

“Hmm . . .” Issa began, “I’m surprised there are any magical people in this town.”

“If you want to join us, you will have to sign a Pact of secrecy and honesty,” Michael said.

Issa was thinking. “I’d like to,” he said, smiling.

Michael told him about all the tests for mastery of the elements, and I described the holidays we celebrated. He offered to teach us the Jewish holidays and customs, and what he knew about Jewish mysticism. After we finished talking, we all ran through the woods together, the rest of us going slow because Issa wasn’t used to it. Then, tired and happy, we headed for my house.

Since my little desk wasn’t big enough for all of us, we set candles on the floor, sat around them, and I got out the Grimoire and handed it to Penny.

“This is our most special book,” I said. “It contains all our magical ideas and records. Our Pact is in here, but you can’t use the whole book until you pass your first tests.”

“May I look at the cover?” Issa asked.

After a glance at me, Penny handed it to him.

“Do you know what this is? It looks like stylized Hebrew letters.”

“It was the only one with that cover,” I said. “The lady at the store said it was strange and no one else wanted it.”

“I can almost read a few words.. Someday, may I bring my Hebrew book and try to figure it out?”

I looked at Penny and Michael. “Sure. When I got it, I wondered if it said something. The Pact is short. Penny will read it to you.”

He listened as Penny read. “It sounds okay to me.”

“Now read it to yourself,” Penny said. “It must be signed in your own blood.”

Issa looked at me a little worried, but then smiled. While he read the Pact, Michael pulled out his recorder and played a simple, happy tune.

“How do I sign it?”

Penny put the pen together and I got out scratch paper and a tissue. She helped him get a drop of blood into the pen. He tried the pen, than signed his name. The rest of our signatures were brown now. Only Issa's was bright red.



Chapter 42

Thirteen.

I was a teenager now. That thought was rolling around in my head a week before my birthday. It was kind of a relief — I had finally made it. But it was scary too — I didn't know exactly why.

I got my first ten-speed bike, some clothes, money, and a new bottle of India ink from Penny. She knew I was getting low. Michael and Issa made my birthday cake.

Then I started to put it all together in my head. Entering puberty. Thirteen. And those fantasies I was having about Michael. I didn't really feel like I could talk about it with anybody, except *maybe* Penny. But it seemed like she had entered puberty years ago.



About a week after my birthday, we gathered at the beach. Sam at Search and Rescue had given me Tom's phone number, and I had called him two days before to see if we could use the canoe. No one would be home at his house, he said, but we could go ahead and use it. Michael, Issa, and I got it down to the beach. Penny was sitting in the sand, looking at the water.

"Did I tell you guys about Diane? She went into surgery the day after I gave her the necklace. The nurse wanted her to take it off, but she refused, and just then the doctor came in. He said she could keep it on. The surgery went *better* than the doctor expected, and afterwards, he told her to always keep that necklace on, and she wears it all the time now. For a while they

didn't think she would walk again, and already she's on crutches!"

We all cheered, "Hooray!"

Penny fell silent again for a minute.

"I guess I'd better swim now, if I'm going to," Penny said.

"We don't have to agree on speed or anything this time," I said. "This is *your* swim. As fast or slow as you want."

"Thanks, Ariel."

We got the canoe into the water and Penny started swimming. I was in my swimsuit, and Michael and Issa were paddling. We stayed a little behind her — the water was calm and we didn't want to cause a wake she'd have to swim through. She looked so sleek in the water, her slender body sliding through it at seven strokes per breath. We soon passed the channel buoy and headed across the inlet.

I didn't feel jealous. There were things I could do better than Penny, and I knew we wouldn't be such good friends if I was better at everything. For almost three years, we had pulled each other along, teaching each other, sometimes even yelling at each other.

We called out the miles, and at about the middle of the inlet, Penny switched to five strokes per breath.

I reminded myself that I was a good swimmer, one of the best around. Penny was just a little better. I owed her this. She had been a good friend, and I didn't think the Wood Sprites would have become real if it wasn't for her help. She had even found the Grove! We were nearing the other side and Penny was still at five strokes. She had said she might turn around and head back if she felt she could, and it looked like she might. I kind of wished it was me in the water, swimming four or more miles without stopping. I wasn't really jealous of Penny, just . . . something else.

She neared the beach, turned, and headed back out. Michael and Issa brought the canoe around, but by the time we got going, we were a little ways behind Penny. I stood up so I could see better. I could see her arms stroking, but . . . they were too slow. I thought I saw her change her breathing. Her rhythm was all off too, I could tell. A warning bell sounded in my head. I strained to see, but I couldn't see her arms moving anymore, even though we were getting closer. I practically jumped over Michael and flew off the end of

the canoe, hitting the water and swimming as hard as I could.

As I swam, I wondered if she had done the same thing I did on my test day two years ago — gotten lightheaded and started floating away. I came up beside her, and I could tell she was struggling, but so weakly she couldn't even get her face out of the water. I grabbed her, brought her up sideways, and squeezed her waist to help her get the water out of her lungs. After the water gushed out, she sputtered and screamed and cried.

Michael appeared in the water, and helped me hold Penny. Issa brought the canoe near and pulled as we pushed. She was still screaming and crying, but her body was limp. Michael and I climbed in.

I held her head at the bottom of the canoe, letting her drain any more water in her lungs. She was still freaking out. "Let's get back across. She's going to need food," I said and the guys started paddling as fast as they could. I had never seen Penny like this. It was spooky. She was gasping instead of breathing, but at least her screaming was less.

By the time we got back to the beach, she had relaxed some. Michael and I carried her while Issa dragged the canoe up. We laid her down in the warm, dry sand, and Michael ran to get our lunches from the bikes. I knelt down beside her.

"Penny, can you hear me?"

She nodded between desperately drawn breaths.

"We're going to help you sit up, and then you can drink this Coke. You need sugar right now." The guys got her up, and I put the can to her lips. But as soon as she took a mouthful, she spit it back out, screaming and crying again. I realized what I had done wrong — she had almost drown, and I was trying to make her drink. After a few minutes she relaxed again.

"Do you think you could eat a cookie?" I asked her. She nodded. I handed her one, and she nibbled on it. Good. We fed her cookies, then a sandwich. She seemed to be getting stronger. Orange slices. She was trying to say something.

"I . . . I don't think I ever want to swim again."



Penny didn't show up for anything for several days, so one day Michael and I met Issa when he got off work at noon, and we all walked over to

Penny's house. Issa had a bag of goodies from the bakery.

We found Penny in her mom's garden, pulling weeds. Without saying anything, we joined her, each person in a different row.

"I don't think I should be swimming teacher anymore," she said. "I'm not even sure I'll swim again."

Michael said, "Penny, would you quit feeling sorry for yourself and just tell us what happened?"

She looked at him with a cold stare. "I blew it. I didn't have my head screwed on. I got tired and I didn't let myself believe it. My arms got heavy but I wouldn't let myself rest. I was too selfish, too proud, okay? And . . . and . . ." she started crying, "I was more scared than I have ever been before. I couldn't even turn over! I was screaming inside and I could feel my lungs filling with water. I was dying!" She jerked out a big weed.

Issa opened his bag and handed her a cinnamon roll. She hesitated, then took it. "That's why we were there," he said, "so you could come as close to dying as you wanted to, and still be okay."

Penny looked at Issa. "I was really dumb. You guys are wonderful. And you're lucky Ariel's your leader and not me."

"By the way, you went almost five miles without stopping," I said. "Issa's going to work on the Grimoire cover, and we want you to come help us. Hebrew is all in calligraphy, you know. He's going to teach us how to make the letters."

"Wood Sprites stick together," Michael said.

Penny looked at each of us. A little smile appeared on her face. "Okay. Bribe me with cinnamon rolls, and I'll do anything."

Penny got her calligraphy stuff and we walked toward my house.

"I think I'm figuring something out," I said. "We have two tests, the Elements and the Vision Quest, and I've been wondering what the third one should be. I think maybe it's not a test we can make up, but each person will be tested by God in the kinds of things they do, especially magic."

Issa smiled at me.

"I finally had my *real* swimming test," Penny said. "And I flunked."

I knew it wasn't yet time to say anything else on the subject.



At my house, we spread our things out on the kitchen table since we wouldn't need to talk about magic. My mom wandered by. "What are you kids doing?"

"Learning Hebrew."

"I thought you were Catholic."

"Hebrew isn't a religion, Mom. It's a language. Anyway, God is the same no matter what you call yourself."

She left after I said that.

Issa showed us how to make the letters, and told us what sound each one made. We worked on scratch paper. Michael listened, but then read some stuff in the study book while we practiced.

My mom wandered back by and looked over my shoulder. "So that's Hebrew. It's very beautiful. Can you all stay for dinner?"

"I thought you said my friends were too old, Mom."

"Well . . . I didn't mean I didn't like your friends . . . I just meant I hoped you could relate to people your age, also."

"I promise, Mom, if I ever find someone 13 years old who likes the things I like, I'll ask them to be my friend."

"We're having hamburgers. Will you all stay?" she asked.

"Sure."

"Okay."

"Sounds great."

About an hour later, Penny and I were getting pretty fair at the Hebrew letters.

ת	ש	ר	ק	צ	פ	ע	ס	נ	מ	ל	כ
T	SH	R	Q	TS	P	O	S	N	M	L	K

י	ט	ח	ז	ו	ה	ד	ג	ב	א
Y	TH	CH	Z	V	H	D	G	B	A

Issa said, "There are some letters on the cover I'm not sure of. They could be several different things. Is it okay if I show my notes to our rabbi and see if

he can make it out?”

“As long as you don’t tell him where it’s from!” Penny asserted.



Chapter 43

Penny started middle school. For the first time in two years, we were in the same school. I realized I had really missed having a Sprite around during the day. They even let her be in eighth grade P. E., so we would be able to run together. But the teacher said we had to be on different teams when doing team sports. That was fair.

Michael started high school. That made me sad.



It took a lot of talking, but Penny finally agreed to go with me to the pool. I could tell she was dreading it. When we got there, I was ready to dive in, but Penny took half an hour in the locker room.

“What’s wrong, Pen?”

“I’m scared, that’s what’s wrong. And I don’t like you calling me Pen. I just don’t know if I can do it anymore, that’s all.”

“Okay. Forget I’m your friend for a minute. I’m the leader of the Grove, and if you want to be a Sprite, you have to try. You don’t have to swim 4 miles, or even one mile, you just have to do your best. Okay?”

Penny looked at me. Her eyes looked sad. I reached out my hand to her. Something was changing between us. I could feel it. We were both in middle school . . . and we were both adolescents now. The little five-year-old Penny I once knew was long gone. Even the nine or ten-year-old super-swimmer Penny was gone. I was the leader of a Grove of Wood Sprites, and she was my assistant. She had to at least try. “We’ll just get our feet wet today, okay?”

She took my out-stretched hand. "Okay. No challenges or dares, or I'm leaving."

"I promise. And I'll stay right with you if you want me to."

We walked out to the pool, and I was glad that hardly anyone else was there. Penny looked white. We went to the shallow end and sat on the side, dangling our feet in the water.

"How does it feel?" I asked.

"Terrible. But I want to try. You've never laughed at me before."

"And I won't now. You're my best friend, remember?"

"Lots of people have best friends who would sell them out for a nickel," she said.

"Not Sprites!"

Penny smiled. After a few minutes, she slid down into the water and stood there as tense as I had ever seen her. It was only three feet deep. I slid in too, and we walked around together. Penny tried bobbing down so the water came up to her neck.

"I feel so stupid!" she said.

"Want to float? I'll spot you."

She did it. After a minute, she nodded at me, so I let her go. Floating didn't bother her . . . but she couldn't swim. She couldn't put her face in the water. Penny — known all over three counties for her swimming speed and endurance — Search and Rescue C team member — was reduced to a pathetic dog paddle.

I stayed with her and did whatever she did, or spotted when she wanted me to. We were standing on the side when some of the college swim team members came in.

"Hey, Penny! Will you swim with us?"

Penny looked at the deck and shuffled into the locker room.

At the October Search and Rescue meeting, she told Jack what had happened, and that she couldn't be on C team anymore. He told her to let him know as soon as she was back in action.



I was working on Issa's cloak one evening alone, but I was thinking about someone else. It used to be just once in a while that I thought like this, but

now it was getting to be all the time. I could see him in my mind, climbing trees or playing his recorder. He was a good friend . . . but I was thinking about more than friends.

Issa was a little bigger than Michael, so I adjusted the pattern. Michael. I could see the shape of his body, especially in his swim trunks. Looking at him, even in my mind, made me tingle inside. His arms wrapped tightly around me — that was what I wanted. Tightly. Squeezing me all he wanted.

But how? Issa said I'd be grown up now if I was Jewish. I'm 13. Michael's almost 15. I could just ask him. "Michael, will you be my . . ." No. I want him to ask me. I won't know if he really loves me or not unless he asks. I'd say *YES!* and anything he wanted to do after that would be okay. Anything.



We all gathered at my house the Saturday before Halloween. Penny was in a good mood again. She was always proud to be my assistant when we were doing Wood Sprite things.

"This book of yours is *very* special. Did you say it was the only one?" Issa asked.

"It was the only one with that cover the bookstore got in, and no one wanted it . . . but me," I said.

"My rabbi helped me. The words are from the *Zohar*, the *Book of Radiance*, a work of Jewish mysticism written about 1280. This is what it looks like in normal Hebrew letters." Issa showed me his paper. "And underneath is what it means."

We all read the meaning of the mysterious Hebrew letters to ourselves.

"Isn't that like something about magic we've learned?" Penny asked.

I nodded, smiling. We all stared at the strange phrases for several minutes more. Penny opened the Grimoire to a new page, and Issa carefully lettered in the Hebrew, working right to left. Then I did the meaning in English.

He smites the sea into seven streams and directs it into seven precious vessels, which he calls Greatness, Strength, Glory, Victory, Majesty, Foundation, and Sovereignty.

He made beings to serve these vessels: each a throne supported

by four columns, with six steps to the throne, in all ten. Altogether, the throne is like the cup of the benediction about which ten statements are made.

There was a special feeling in the room, and we were all smiling — like a secret had been revealed, a treasure chest opened.

Michael dumped a bag he had brought. Halloween cookies! In the middle of each was a little sugar pumpkin. We munched as we talked.

“Did you finish it?” Michael asked me.

“Yep.” I opened a drawer and brought out Issa’s cloak. “This is the cloak of the Druidic Bard. We all have one.”

Issa grinned as he unfolded it. “Thank you!”

“Try it on!” Penny said.

“It should be big enough to go over clothes and a jacket,” I said.

Issa stood up and put it on. “It’s . . . very nice! Even a hood!” He tied the belt. “I bet you can really disappear in one of these!”

“Look inside!” Penny said.

“Pockets. What should I keep in them?”

“We all carry fire-making pouches. You’ll get one soon,” Penny said. “Michael has his recorder, and I have Tarot cards. Then we put all the candles and stuff we need in them so we won’t have to go in and out of the Magic Circle.”

Issa looked happy as he took it off and carefully folded it.

“Any spells on Halloween?” I asked.

“I have a placement test coming up. Is a spell to help me okay?” Michael asked.

I answered. “Only if you ask for the patience and wisdom to help you study, not just to have all the answers pop out of thin air.”

Issa gave me a funny look.

“I see what you mean,” Michael said.

I think Penny saw Issa’s funny look. She said, “We have strict rules so our magic will always be white, and not break God’s laws.”

Issa nodded.

Penny went on. “My sister is trying to decide if she should change her

major in college or not. She asked my opinion, and I told her I'd think about it. Does that sound okay for a Tarot reading?"

"To me," Michael said.

"Me too," I said.

"It's on a school day, but maybe if we go right at 3:00 we could make jack-o-lanterns," Michael said.

"Yeah!" Penny said.

"Will that music be ready, Michael?" I asked.

He nodded. "It's perfect for Halloween!"

"Who's bringing the pumpkins?"

"I can," Issa said. "Four?"

"Great!"

We decided on pot-luck things, and then spent about an hour working on the study book. Both Michael and I had new stuff to add to it. Issa had been reading it, and it was really helping him to understand the magic we did. We went over our Halloween plans again to make sure we were prepared. The only thing we kept secret from Issa was that we were going trick-or-treating.



Chapter 44

Issa met Michael at school, and they walked to my house, carrying the pumpkins. Penny and I were ready, and we all headed for the park, each with a pumpkin and a daypack with our food, cloaks, and magical tools.

Issa was silent, but I could tell he was wondering where we were going. Michael was holding in a grin. Penny was higher than a kite, bouncing and talking as we walked. The day was clear and breezy, but not too cold.

Penny fell silent as we entered the empty picnic area, and we walked quietly in a line through the woods, Michael leading, taking a slightly different path than ever before. We came to the Guardian Hedge.

Issa looked up at it, then looked at us. We put on our cloaks.

"Are you ready for your first Wood Sprite celebration, Issa?" I asked.

"How do I look?" he asked, putting his hood up.

"Very spritish!" Penny said.

He took a deep breath. "I'm ready. I want to learn magic."

Michael found a crawl-slot through the Hedge, and we followed him in. Issa's eyes got bigger. The sun was slanting in through the trees, and the forest was full of blue-green light. In my mind I could see us, a line of blue-cloaked figures winding through the woods, only visible because we were moving.

As we wound our way up onto the cedar-crowned hill, Issa's mouth began to hang open. "It is so beautiful!" he said.

"We gather in silence," Penny said, putting her finger to her lips.

Sitting quietly around the fire pit, I thought about the lesson I had prepared — and about the Grimoire cover. Strange. After a while Penny kindled a new fire and Michael carried wood. “It’s okay to talk now,” Penny said.

“If I have ever felt God anywhere on earth, I feel Him here,” Issa said.

“This place is for all of God’s good Spirits,” Penny said.

We shared the Athame and Issa’s pocket knife and worked to turn the pumpkins into jack-o-lanterns. Penny collected all the seeds to roast at home. I liked Michael’s the best — it had a wicked grin. I brought tea lights out of my daypack, and we placed the finished creations around the Grove to await the darkness. Finally, we heated Penny’s tamale pie, dished out my salad, and opened cans of juice Issa brought.

“Do you have an order of ceremony?” Issa asked.

“Yes,” Penny said. “The potluck can come either before or after. As soon as the sun sets, we’ll enter the Magic Circle.”

“You only go in at night?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, “but it usually works out that way. Except on Lemmas, the celebration of the first fruits.”

We ate and answered Issa’s questions. Michael passed out pastries he had made for dessert, and he was obviously proud of them. The sun went down and we got out the candles we would need, four tall white, one yellow, and one purple for the Tarot reading. With jack-o-lanterns lit and glowing white candles in our hands, Michael gave the dedication.

We set our candles on the altar and sat down for the lesson.

“The Second Principle of Magic,” I began. “Harm no one, for all harm will return to you three times over. Also, you would be betrayed by your efforts, for those Spirits willing to carry out black magic are not God’s Spirits, and they are not honorable. God’s Spirits would refuse. Any magic that attempts to force a person or a Spirit is harmful, for all of God’s children were given free will. Neither harm yourself. Truly white magic that helps another requires no sacrifice from you other than your sincere magical effort and knowledge.”

Everyone was thoughtful for a little while. Then Michael said, “You mean, if someone that we really care about is dying, we can’t offer our life in

exchange?”

“If God wants to save the dying person, He doesn’t need your death to do it,” I said. “But He does want to know you care. Remember the story about Abraham and Isaac? God only wanted to be sure Abraham was sincere. He is spirit, and has no use for blood.”

I could see Issa nodding thoughtfully.

There were no more questions, so we had prayer time. Spirit of Understanding, please help me to figure out what I want with Michael. How can I tell him? How can I find out what he feels? “God, please hear our prayers.”

Issa watched carefully as I lit the yellow candle and asked for the Spirit of Knowledge to help Michael with his test. Then I asked for a special blessing of knowledge on a necklace of three clay beads, and slipped it over Michael’s head. I had planned to kiss him on the cheek at that point, but didn’t find the courage when he was actually right there in front of me.

Penny lit a purple candle and asked the Spirit of Counsel to help her and her sister. Then she laid out 5 cards.

“I’m using all the cards now. This is the present,” she said, pointing to the middle one. “This path is her major now, near and far future, and this is the major she might switch to.” She turned over the middle card. “Is someone taking notes for me? Thanks, Michael. In the present . . . Exploration . . . let me see . . . of her self-image. On the path she is on now . . . um . . . look up Taurus for me. The four of swords.”

“It says Determination, then some symbols I don’t know.”

“Thanks. Determination, requiring a lot of patience, and finally . . . a Queen, a woman of will power . . . Leo. And if she changes majors, struggle, maybe about religion . . . and then . . . renunciation.”

I could tell Issa was amazed. Penny collected her cards and blew out the candle. I nodded to Michael, and he began a haunting melody in a minor key.

“Tonight begins the celebration of All Saints and All Souls,” I began. “This is a time to look back and remember people who have died.” Michael played as I spoke — his music was sad and spooky. “As Penny breaks the bread, I will blow out the candles one by one.” I blew out one of the tall white candles. Penny had a worried look on her face. I went on, “All of the people who have

ever died went into darkness, hoping there was light somewhere beyond.” I blew out another. “We have to have faith like that too.” Michael played. I blew out the third candle. Penny broke the bread and passed it around. As we started to eat, I blew out the last candle. The fire had burned down to coals, the jack-o-lanterns didn’t give much light, and so we were almost in the dark. Michael played low and quietly.

A scream! From kind of far away, maybe the picnic area. Again. A girl or a lady. Faintly, “Help!”

“What should we do?” Penny said.

“Let’s check it out — but stay out of sight!” I whispered. “Michael, please stay with Issa.”

I pulled my hood up and dashed down the hill toward the Hedge. I could tell Penny was near me. I knew Michael and Issa would come more slowly. Another scream. Through the Hedge and into a run again. I was a cat, dodging shapes and shadows in the darkness, and Penny was right beside me. We came to the edge of the picnic area with its one streetlight and stepped into a shadow. I looked and listened for anything.

“There!” Penny whispered, pointing. Just out of the light, near the restrooms, someone was struggling.

“Shut up!” a man’s voice said.

“Leave me alone!” the girl screamed.

I was shaking, but we had to do something. We were Sprites, masters of the woods. I pointed out a route through the shadows, and Penny and I silently dashed to a tree much closer.

“She’s young!” Penny whispered in my ear.

I could hear clothes tearing. The girl screamed again, but I could hear her crying too.

The man’s voice hissed, “Shut up or I’ll cut you!”

“He’s got a knife!” Penny whispered.

“So do I!” I said. I unsnapped the safety loop around the Athame and crept forward. They were in some ferns. I could see the man trying to get on top of the girl. My anger flared up hot inside me. I crept behind him. He was making too much noise to hear me.

“Don’t!” the girl screamed.

Now or never, Ariel. I glimpsed Penny just behind me, pulled out my knife and leaped forward, grabbing his hair and getting the blade under his throat. "Let her go or I'll cut *you!*" I roared.

"Hey, hey, don't, I didn't do it, just let me go, just leave me alone . . ."

"Shut up!" Penny growled.

"Get off her," I said, "real slow!" He smelled bad. Part of me wanted to kill him. I had never felt rage like that before. It scared me and I knew I was shaking like a leaf, but I was madder than I was scared. He got up and I kept the blade at his throat.

Penny jumped in beside the girl. "You okay?"

She was crying. I don't think she was much older than us. She managed to say, "I think so."

Michael and Issa arrived, hooded like Penny and me.

The man started to shake. "Hey, what are you guys, anyway? What's going on? Where did you come from? Let me go!" he said with a trembling voice.

Issa grabbed him and bent his arms behind his back.

"Ouch!" he screamed.

"Some kind of rope or string, please, Michael," I said, handing him the knife. He ran off to find some, and I knelt down to help Penny with the girl. She was still crying.

"Did he rape you?" Penny asked.

"Almost," she said, sobbing.

I could see Issa taking the man into the light, and Michael running up with some cord. Penny and I helped the girl get her clothes back on. Her shirt was torn, but her pants and jacket were okay. Then we walked with her slowly out of the ferns.

The guys had the man tied up, hands and feet, and laying face down. I couldn't help but clap and cheer. Penny did too. The girl wasn't crying so much, seeing what we had done to him.

"Who are you guys?" she asked between sobs.

We all still had our hoods up. "We're friends, that's all we can tell you," I said.

We slowly walked over to where Issa and Michael had the guy tied up. He

was begging them to let him go. Issa had one foot on his back to hold him down.

"You guys are wonderful," the girl said. "What can I do to thank you?"

"Don't tell anyone about us," I said.

She looked into my shadowy hood. "Okay. You must be special people. I won't tell."

By now the man was crying like a baby.

"What do you want us to do with him?" I asked. "The Sheriff's just a phone call away."

She was thoughtful for a long moment. "No. I think he learned more from you guys than he would in jail. Just let me call my dad. He can be here in about 2 minutes."

We walked with her to the payphone, then chatted while she waited for her father. As soon as she recognized his car coming into the park, I nodded to Michael, and he cut the cord around the man's feet.

He dashed away, hands still tied behind his back. It was almost funny.

Michael handed me my Athame.

"Bye!" we all said to the girl as we slipped into the woods. Once in shadows, I turned to make sure she got safely into the car, then followed the other Sprites back to the Grove.



The four jack-o-lanterns were still flickering and grinning at us. Michael built up the fire. I think Penny was deeply troubled by what happened to the girl. Issa was very quiet. I was still angry.

"Please light a blue candle for healing," Penny said.

I got one out, lit it at the fire, and stepped into the Magic Circle. I knew what I had to do. The others stepped in behind me, and I lit the four white candles with the blue one.

"God and Spirits, we hope you can help the girl at the picnic area to heal." There was a little voice inside me. Should I really say that? Okay. "And the man, too."

I closed my eyes for a moment. The excitement was fading, and all I could feel was fear and doubt. I think there were tears in my eyes. "God, I don't know if what I did was right. I threatened to hurt someone with my Athame.

Was that okay?" I could remember clearly the promise I had made long ago when I consecrated it — never to hurt anyone. With reluctance, I pulled the shiny wooden-handled blade out that had been my helper for so long and set it on the altar. "If I have used my power wrong, please take away my power, even my life if you want to. I don't want to be a black Wood Sprite!"

I started crying. Tears poured down my cheeks. I shook and sobbed and I couldn't stop. My whole body was filled with fear and hurt about what had happened. I felt what the girl felt, and I cried. I felt a little of what the man felt after we tied him up, and I cried. And I felt like I had done something wrong with my magic, something black, and I cried.

Hands were touching me. Friendly hands. They were saying something. I felt arms holding me. Someone was saying something.

"Look, Ariel! Look at the knife!"

I wanted to, but my eyes were full of tears.

"Please look, Ariel!" Penny's voice said.

I rubbed at my eyes and tried to focus. I could see the candles . . . and my Athame . . . and a tiny butterfly sitting on the blade. A butterfly. On Halloween?

"Remember when we first broke bread here?" Penny said from beside me, her arm around my shoulders.

"A butterfly!" I said. As I spoke, it flew away. "Good-bye, butterfly!"

"If that isn't a sign from God that you did His will . . . or at least are forgiven if you didn't . . . then I don't know what is," Issa said.

I hugged each of my wonderful Wood Sprites. Michael last. I wanted so badly to tell him I loved him. But all I said was, "Thank you for the wonderful music."

Outside the circle, we thanked the Grove and returned to the fire. It was getting late. No one said much, but we were all smiling. I think everyone, even me, decided that what we had done was okay. Michael said the girl was in his school, but he would keep everything secret. We saved the dishes to do tomorrow, put out the fire, and left the Grove behind. Michael played as we walked down the road, the happy song he first played at Lammas. Penny insisted we go trick-or-treating at a few houses that still had their lights on. Issa didn't mind.

When we were almost to my house, Issa said, "Is every Wood Sprite ceremony that intense?"



Chapter 45

It's hard to remember much about the rescue that happened a couple of weeks later. Me and my parents were eating dinner when a stand-by call came through — it scared me because there had been so few that year. I managed to finish my dinner before the real call, about ten minutes later.

It was a B team call, up into the National Forest. Since Carl wasn't a team leader, he didn't yet know any more about it than Penny and I did. We drove for a long time through the darkness and the rain.

The trailhead was muddy and depressing. We learned that a family was long overdue from a backpacking trip at Russell Lake. Mabel passed out extra food packets and we started up the dark, muddy trail, every other person carrying their flashlight.

I remember little more than walking, rain falling all around me, following the flashlight in front of me. Penny was behind me with her light going. Mine was being saved for later.

Three times we rested, munching on cookies and crackers that got wet before we could get them into our mouths. Then we would walk again for a half hour or more.

Sometime after I had lost all track of time, we arrived at the lake. Jack cut the team in half, and the half Penny and I were on had to cross the log jam at the lake's outlet to search the other side. I helped carry and tie ropes until we had two hand-holds stretched tight across the logs. Then, one by one, we went over, the rest shining their lights.

For another hour we searched the shore, calling and checking the usual campsites. Half the flashlights were dying, and mine was on now. It looked like it would rain forever. Penny mumbled, "I wish I had a purple candle."

A little while later, we found the family at what might have been a nice campsite, except for the big tree branch that had fallen on their tent and crushed the man's foot. Sky flares went up to show the other half of the team where we were. I held the light while Penny helped set up tents, then she held it for me while I helped dig drainage ditches around the tents.

Jack brought the seven-year-old girl to our tent. We got her out of her wet clothes and into a sleeping bag, and then just talked to her and fed her fig bars. It wasn't too long before she relaxed and fell asleep.

I lay awake listening to the rain and thinking about what Penny had said. Why couldn't we carry some magical supplies on rescues? It wouldn't take up much space or weight to have a few small candles and some amulet things. Hmm.

Sometime during the night, the rain stopped. As dawn crept into the sky, we ate some of our meat sticks and raisin bars and started to pack the camp. A huge Navy helicopter landed on the lake and took us all back to the trailhead, and the family on to a hospital. Jack announced a special meeting for that evening to replenish our packs. I thought about my magic idea all the way home.



Snow had been on the ground almost a month when we crunched our way through the woods on the Winter Solstice for a hearty Yuletide potluck lunch. The Grove was almost free of snow, only the fire pit being open to the sky.

"Our wood pile is all wet," Michael said.

"There's plenty of dry on the trees. I'll get some," Penny said and leapt down the hill.

"I could stretch a tarp over the wood pile from these three trees," Issa offered. "I have a friend who has some brown canvass that would be almost invisible."

"I'll help pay for it if you want . . ." I said.

"No problem. He owes me."

Penny came back with an armload of dry wood and we worked together to

build a fire, teaching Issa as we did it. We began a simple ceremony in the Magic Circle, and I shared what I had learned about Norse gods and their holidays. When we came to the breaking of the bread, there was a surprise.

"Your sharing of the loaf is good, but just as old a custom is sharing a cup of wine that has been blessed," Issa said, pulling a small but beautiful ceramic goblet out of his cloak. "This is the chalice, the cup of the benediction, the vessel into which God pours his emanations." He set it on the altar beside the loaf. "Shall we share the cup?"

I looked at Michael, and then at Penny. We all smiled. "What shall we drink?" I asked.

"Fruit of the vine," Issa said, taking a small bottle from his cloak and filling the chalice with a rich red wine.

"God," I said, picking up the chalice, "this is your vessel of Wisdom. As each Sprite drinks from it, please help them to want to be wise like you."

Issa smiled. I handed the cup to Penny. She took a sip and smacked her lips. Michael took a sip and his eyes got big. Issa took a big swallow.

"The priest . . . or priestess . . . gets the honor of draining the cup," he said, handing it to me.

I looked into it, still half-full of wine. I took a sip. Yum! It was sweet and fruity. I took a swallow. Delicious! I drank the rest. It was good to the last drop.

We left the Circle and started our lunch cooking. I could feel myself getting goofy. I started swaying back and forth on the log, so Michael and Issa put their arms around me. I started laughing and couldn't stop. It was strange but fun, and I didn't settle down until I was halfway through my lunch.

"The rest of us should drink more next time," Penny said, smiling, "so you won't have to drink so much!"

I giggled at what she said. "No way! We'll fill the chalice again if we have to!"

Later, when I could think again, I remembered how Issa made sure I was back down to earth before he let me leave the Grove.



As I trimmed my first two-inch candle at one of our candle making days in

January, Penny said, "What is *that* for? You'd hardly have time to name a Spirit!"

"Remember that rescue in November, when you wished you had a purple candle?"

"How could I forget!"

I opened my new leather bag and poured out the contents. "Waterproof matches, six-inch white candles, amulet bags and cords, beads, and two-inch candles in all the colors!"

"Neat!" Penny said, pawing through it all. "For rescues?"

"Yep! And any other time we need an emergency magic kit."

"You know what I wanted to do on that rescue?" Penny asked. "Ask for the rain to stop!"

"I thought so. It did, remember?"

"Yeah. But I wanted it to stop BEFORE we were drenched!"

I looked sideways at Penny. She smiled — she knew what she was saying. We all started making two-inch candles, and soon had plenty for all kinds of magic.



Chapter 46

“Oh, Ariel, it was so wonderful! I was really starting to wonder when the amulet would work, but I found it had been working all that time! He said he had been slowly falling in love with me almost since the day you cast that spell. And I guess I was falling in love with him too, but I didn’t want to even think about it because I thought he was maybe going to be *your* boyfriend. Thank you, Ariel! Your magic worked!

“We sat in my mom’s garden for a long time, just getting closer and closer to each other. And we looked at each other and I felt things I’ve never felt before. I just melted, Ariel! It was more wonderful than I ever dreamed. It was the first time for both of us, and we made promises to each other. I knew my mom wouldn’t be home all day . . .”

As Penny spoke, I was crying inside. Something inside me was being torn apart. Something inside me was dying.

“We went really slow, like we had all the time in the world. I even remembered to use the contraceptive. We put oil all over each other . . .”

Penny told me more, but I didn’t hear it. She got the boy I wanted. It was my fault, if anyone’s. What had I done to get him? Why hadn’t I worn an amulet for love? I felt like I was sinking into a dark hole, and I wanted to cry . . . but I couldn’t cry with Penny now. And if I couldn’t cry with her, then I couldn’t cry with anyone.

I looked at Penny. She was happy. Every freckle on her face looked happy. I said some nice things and went home. I wanted to be alone so I could cry.

I didn't go home. It was a Sunday afternoon and I wandered to the park, kicking at snow and ice as I walked. Part of the time I cried softly to myself. Everything felt ruined — I never wanted to climb trees again, or run through the woods, or anything like that. Everything I saw just reminded me of wanting to be with Michael, and everything made me cry. I sat on the beach and stared at the water. The tide came up and got my pants wet. I didn't care, but after a while I got up and walked away.

In the alder grove I found a tree I liked, leaned against it and cried. For so long I had been trying to figure out how to love Michael, and now he was gone. He was the first boy I ever loved, and he was gone. I felt so lost and empty . . .

I finally wandered home, cold and wet and hungry. I sat in the bathtub until the water got cold. When my mom asked me what was wrong at dinner, I said I couldn't talk about it and slammed the door to my room behind me.



That next week, I moped my way through school for a few days, but finally decided I didn't want it to ruin my life completely. I was still the leader of the Grove. I was still on the Search and Rescue team. It was my fault it had happened — I had never made any kind of claim on Michael, never told him how I felt about him. Damn it! Why hadn't I?

I decided not to let anyone know what I was feeling. I started to talk nicely to people even though I didn't feel nice. I learned how to live in two different worlds — nice, friendly Ariel on the outside, and all the hurt I felt on the inside that I couldn't tell anyone about. Only when I was alone, or with Tara, did I let the darkness show on my face.

At our last candle making meeting, I could tell how happy Penny and Michael were, holding hands and touching each other. They told Issa too, but not in as much detail as Penny had told me. I said I was happy for them. When they had all gone home, I sat and stared at the wall in my room instead of doing my homework.

At Candlemas, I asked Issa to tell us about the Jewish religion. I had tried to prepare a lesson, but found I couldn't concentrate on it. He was shy about it at first, but when he realized we were interested, he loosened up. Actually, I just pretended to be interested.

When the chalice was filled with wine, I remembered how it had made me feel the first time. I wanted to feel that way again. After everyone had taken a small drink, I greedily gulped down the rest. For a little while it took away the rotten feeling of being one thing on the inside and another thing on the outside.



Chapter 47

I began searching for Michael.

I searched at the rings where we had first met. I gave one of the lower rings a shove and let it swing back and forth. I could hear myself explaining to him how to do it, how to work with the universe and fly.

I searched at school. The library steps remembered him, but told me he wasn't there anymore — he didn't go to middle school anymore.

I searched at the college pool. I could see him struggling with his rhythm while Penny prodded him. But today there were just some preschool teachers there, pretending to teach the kids to swim.

I searched at our swimming beach. The bushes remembered his bicycle. Tom's canoe remembered him. The first half mile of water to the channel buoy knew his stroke, but not the three and a half miles of water beyond.

I searched in the maple trees. He had been there, they said, putting up swings for Penny and me. His knots had never failed. He was a slow but steady climber, they said.

I searched in the alder grove. One of the trees remembered his scream and his blood. The trees near remembered me holding him, and then letting him finish alone. Thinking about that made me cry a little, but I went on searching.

By then I knew I was searching for a Michael that didn't exist anymore. I went to the Grove last. The flood of memories I found there took me hours to sort out — building fires with him, holding hands around the Magic Circle,

listening to his music, making a love amulet for Penny. A love spell for Penny . . . she was my best friend and I wanted her to be happy. I wasn't angry that she was happy, but . . . but what about me?

Spring was in the air when I got through searching. Issa invited us all to a Passover meal. I think maybe I hadn't really been searching for Michael, even a Michael of the past. I had really been searching for Ariel.



Issa's family living room had been completely changed. It now had a big low table in it, only about a foot off the ground, with lots and lots of pillows and cushions all around it, but no chairs or other furniture. No lights were on, but many candles were burning on the table.

Besides us Sprites and Issa's parents and his eight-year-old sister, about six other people were there, all Jewish. Issa's father wore a white robe and sat at the head of the table. He told each of us where he wanted us to sit. Issa was on his left, then me, then Penny, then Michael.

I knew it was supposed to be a ceremonial meal, but the food sure looked strange. As soon as everyone sat down and was quiet, Issa's mother filled everyone's wine glass from a big decanter. It looked like the cherry-red kind we used at the Grove.

"Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, creator of the fruit of the vine. Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe . . ." Issa's father gave a dedication, and then everyone began to drink their glass of wine. The whole thing! Penny and Michael looked a little scared. I loved it — the same sweet kind as before.

Issa's sister got a pitcher of water, a large bowl, and a towel over her arm, and went from person to person, kneeling beside them. We watched as each person washed their hands, and by the time she got to us, we knew what to do.

Issa's father dipped pieces of celery in something and his mother went around, putting a piece of it on each plate. The wine hit my head. He said, "Blessed art thou, O Lord our God, king of the universe, who creates the fruit of the earth." Everyone ate their celery. I could see Penny's lips shrivel when she tasted the vinegar.

Issa's father was doing something with a large piece of matza cracker, putting part of it in a cloth. I was feeling happy and starting to really enjoy

myself. Issa and his mother helped his father lift the plate of matzas, and everyone but Penny and Michael and me said, "This is the bread of poverty which our forefathers ate in the land of Egypt . . ."

Michael. Suddenly I looked at him, even stared at him. He didn't notice me. He had never noticed me. Issa's mother was filling our wine glasses again. He had never kissed me, never held my hand unless I initiated it, or anything else. What had Penny said? He had been falling in love with her ever since that Halloween I made the love amulet. I wanted to cry, just let big crocodile tears come out.

"Why is this night different from other nights?" Issa's sister was saying. "Other nights we eat leavened bread. Why do we only eat unleavened bread tonight?"

Issa's father read something for a few minutes, all about being slaves in Egypt. Then everyone lifted their glasses, and we did too. I put away my tears. Issa's mom read something, and we put our wine back down.

Issa's father read for a long time, stuff from the Bible, it sounded like. I listened to most of it, but the only part I remembered was our response each time. It seemed to somehow be directed at me.

"Had He sunk our oppressors in the midst of it, but not satisfied our needs in the desert for 40 years . . ."

And we all said, "We should have been content!"

"Had He satisfied our needs in the desert for 40 years, but not fed us manna . . ."

And we all said, "We should have been content!"

There were lots more lines like that, and then he explained the matza and the bitter herbs. "And they made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and in brick, and in all manner of service in the field . . ."

I had forgotten all about Michael. We raised our wine and chanted a song. The past was gone for me. I could hardly even remember it. It is gone, finished, irrelevant. I am happy right now, and I have a future, but I don't know what it will be like. I've never known so little about my future before . . .

We drank our wine and then washed our hands again. After saying a few things, we ate matzas. I was getting goofy, and I remembered Issa's sister smiling at me. The words his father read were just a pleasant background

now, and I ate the lettuce dipped in a fruity sauce. I really was trying not to giggle.

I remember a big bone on a plate with some meat on it, but no one ate it. There was a lot more reading, by both Issa's mom and dad, and then we drank a third glass of wine. I remember someone opening the front door, and then I heard, "Pour out Thy wrath against the nations that know Thee not . . ."

I was starting to sway against Penny or Issa. I didn't know which. More words were read. Issa read some, and some of the other Jewish people read too. I gave up and just lay back on the pillows.

Somehow my wine glass was filled again, and somehow I drank it. I remember peeking out at all the smiling faces in the room, especially Issa's sister. She was wobbling too when she tried to sit up. I remember seeing Penny and Michael holding hands and giggling, but I didn't care. I remember everyone shouting, "Next year in Jerusalem!" and then I think I fell asleep.

I dreamed people were singing songs. Maybe they were. I went back to sleep.

Finally I woke up and it was quiet. Issa's mom made me drink a glass of water, then tucked me into blankets on a couch. I caught a glimpse of Penny fast asleep on another couch before the lights were turned off.



Chapter 48

“Another Sprite?” I said. Penny had caught me off guard. The last thing I would have thought about these days was a new Sprite.

“She knows all about herbs and incense and stuff, and she’s studying astrology,” Penny said. “I met her in the herb store. I was looking for something to make an amulet for Michael with. We might have to change the Earth, Air, Fire, and Water tests a little for her, but I bet she’ll want to join!”

“How old is she?”

“Twenty-one or 22 or something. She’s a little heavy, compared to the rest of us. I bet she’ll like swinging, and I have a hunch she’ll want to do her best at the other stuff. She sounded like she really wants to do important things with her herbs.”

I agreed we should consider her, but I let Penny make the arrangements. We all met at the park that Saturday. I was still the leader of the Grove, but the idea of a new Sprite wasn’t so exciting anymore. A cloud lingered in my mind, a dark one. In my thoughts, I had forgiven Penny and Michael. But in my heart . . .

Her name was Dulcy, and she had long silver-blond hair. She was 22 years old, and worked as a waitress at the health foods restaurant. She carried a patchwork leather shoulder bag from which she pulled little bags and bottles of dried herbs and things. The grass was still wet from the rain that morning, so we found a dry place in the woods under a cedar tree.

“This is Myrtle, which might be called Candleberry or Bayberry. It’s ruled

by Venus and the element Water, and is perfect for charms of love, fertility, and youthfulness.”

She seemed to know her stuff. We all munched on pastries Michael had made. Dulcy loved them — she admitted to having an incurable sweet tooth.

“This is Betony, ruled by Jupiter and Fire. It’s a purification herb used in incense. A sachet of it helps prevent nightmares.”

We found a maple, and Issa put up a swing. I wondered if Issa and Dulcy might make a good couple — they weren’t very different in age. Dulcy was excited and eager to try it when she saw Penny swing. She didn’t have Penny’s gracefulness, but she wasn’t afraid.

I went last, but my heart wasn’t in it. I just watched the new leaves against the sky and let the breeze blow my hair back and forth.

Penny and Michael raced to 30 feet up alders to show Dulcy some of the other things we did. As they were resting before coming down, Michael looked at me for a moment, and I’m almost sure I saw sadness in his eyes. I remembered the time he cut his hands and I helped him. Maybe he remembered too.

We all walked toward the playground, and Dulcy detoured to the restrooms. I wandered toward the swings. All of a sudden Michael was right beside me. “Even though I’m Penny’s boyfriend now, you’ll always be the leader of the Grove.”

I smiled a little smile. We all found swings, and Penny said, “I propose we tell her about us and invite her.”

Michael and Issa both nodded. I saw Dulcy coming toward us. Hmm. An herb lady. “Sure,” I said.

She got on a swing, and Penny and Michael did most of the talking. They did a good job of telling her all the things that were important to us. I felt some pride.

“A real magical society! And none of you are really into herbs yet? Sounds fantastic! Except for the part about going to church . . .”

Penny and Michael said she could go with them. It made me realize I hadn’t gone in a while. I decided to start going to Mass again — alone, I guess.



A week later Dulcy signed the Pact, and we told her about Beltane. It

would be on a Sunday evening, and she said she would have to swap shifts at work with one of the other waitresses. The rest of us decided to go to the Grove early and give it a good spring cleaning. Penny and I planned an evening to make Dulcy's cloak. It was a little scary — Penny and I hadn't done much together since she and Michael became lovers.

Beltane, the eve of May, was cool and sunny. Penny and Michael ranged far and collected a huge pile of firewood. Issa brought wood and a saw, enlarged the storage hollow and lined it with tight-fitting boards. He made a door that fit snugly and when he was finished, even ants would have a hard time getting in. I fixed a couple of Magic Circle stones that had fallen over, chipped wax off the altar, and helped Issa put up the tarp over the wood pile.

At sunset we put on our cloaks and went to meet Dulcy at the picnic area. She was carrying not one, but three shoulder bags full of herbs. When she spotted us coming out of the woods, all hooded, she smiled.

"Wonderful!" she said, looking us up and down.

I took her new cloak out of my pack and handed it to her.

She looked at me and said "For being the leader, you sure are quiet, Ariel."

"She loosens up after a glass of wine," Penny said.

I wasn't sure I liked that comment.

"These pockets are fantastic! I can put all kinds of herbs in them."

We led her into the woods. She didn't like the crawl through the Guardian Hedge too well, but she loved the Grove.

"Wow! This is the most perfectly magical place I've ever seen! Our magic will be powerful when done here. Can I come here to do herb work sometimes?"

Penny looked at me.

"I come here to think sometimes," I said.

"And there are nice places for tents over there," Penny said, "but let's all be silent until the new fire is kindled."

Issa built the fire — he had been slowly preparing for his tests. I felt proud of the Grove, so fresh and clean looking with all the spring growth on the trees and bushes, and all the tidying up we had done today. I was proud of all the Sprites too — all except for myself. I didn't really feel like the leader anymore.

We began our Beltane ceremony. At every part, Dulcy had an herb to add

to whatever was happening, set on the altar, tossed in the fire, or sprinkled on our heads. I didn't feel like worrying about it. Penny was amazed — I think she was looking up to Dulcy. To my surprise, Issa was the one who kept bringing up the standards of white magic, asking Dulcy questions, and teaching her our rules.

At spell-casting time, Penny went to the altar and made an amulet of love and faithfulness for Michael from an herb Dulcy handed her. She put it on him and they kissed. Then he made one and put it on her. It made me feel something — many things. I was happy for them . . . but I hated them too.

Michael did the blessing of the seeds and the fields, surrounded by Dulcy's herbs. I was glad when Issa poured the wine — I was feeling lonely and I didn't like it. The sweet red liquid tasted so good, and by the time we were thanking the Grove (with a sprinkling of herbs, of course), I was floating.

As we sat around the crackling fire and ate dinner, Penny and Michael, and occasionally Issa, answered Dulcy's questions. Penny told her about the study book, and Dulcy promised to have lots to add to it. Michael played, and his music went well with the wine in my head. Dulcy scraped some coals out of the fire and put herbs on them to smoke.

"This incense helps to release the magical powers within us," she said.

I took a deep whiff of the smoke — it almost made my head spin!

Dulcy went on, saying, "We need a big thurible for charcoal and incense. I think I know where I can get one."

I took another deep whiff of the smoke and decided I liked it.



Chapter 49

I felt funny about Issa doing his tests for mastery of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. With Penny and Michael, I had been right there the whole time, helping them, teaching them, even improving my skills as they learned theirs. I hadn't been there with Issa. I hadn't taught him much of anything. Penny and Michael had done it all.

I told Penny I'd meet them at the park. I went early, crept into the silent Grove, and took a big swig of wine from the container Issa kept in the storage hollow. The feeling that people were passing me by, leaving me behind, was bothering me deeply.

I went out and met the others. Dulcy was excited. We had told her we would be flexible with the tests, that it was the effort and self-discipline that counted. Issa's tests began, and I just tagged along, enjoying the wine in my head, not knowing what else to do. He did fine in the maples and alders, climbing slowly but with strength and confidence.

We all piled into Dulcy's Volkswagen and buzzed out to the swimming beach. Since Dulcy and Issa were the biggest two, they sat in the front, and the rest of us squeezed in the back. I thought about Dulcy and Issa as a couple again. I wondered if Dulcy would like being Jewish.

Issa swam the mile, only resting twice on the way back. I looked out across the water and remembered the times I had gone the four miles. It seemed so long ago.

Back at the park, Issa ran through the wild area, then built a fire in one of

the barbecues. We ate our lunch, but I didn't taste much of it — I couldn't feel the wine anymore, just the loneliness and tears right under the surface that I didn't dare let out.

Issa ran three miles. I cheered with the rest. Penny looked at me. I told her to go ahead.

"Issa," she said, "you are our brother forever."



Just a few days after Penny turned 12, I came home from shopping for a new summer blouse. I walked into the dining room and stopped dead in my tracks. Something was wrong. Something was missing. For so long the large Search and Rescue receiver had sat on the buffet table, silently monitoring one special radio frequency. Every few months it had come to life, calling me to some kind of rescue. A child lost in the woods. A boating accident. We had even helped during the power failure last summer.

Now it was gone. I felt a big hole in my life, an emptiness that cried out to be filled. I jumped when my mom put her hands on my shoulders from behind.

"I'm sorry, Honey. Jack came over today. He said you haven't been to a meeting in four months. I even found the little receiver in your room, the one you're supposed to carry with you."

Tears were trying to come out, but I wouldn't let them.

"He did say," she went on, "that you would be welcomed back if you ever wanted to rejoin the team."

I went to my room and slammed the door. Clutching my pillow, I finally cried myself to sleep.



Michael was planning his Vision Quest. Penny talked me into going to the State Park with her. "Remember, Ariel, how we always wanted to do this together, but we couldn't because one or the other of us was doing *our* Vision Quest? Now we can!"

"Okay. It sounds like fun."

Michael arranged for an extra day off from the bakery, and we all gathered early in the morning to clear out the stuff at the Grove. Dulcy had never seemed bothered by the idea of the elements tests, even though she would

have a hard time doing them, but the Vision Quest scared her, I think.

Michael checked his pockets. He looked ready. He and Penny kissed before they parted. I looked at the ground.

As Penny and I rode toward the State Park, I realized how out of shape I was. I tried not to show it, but I was exhausted by the time we got there. My guts hurt and my legs were sore. And I was mad at myself.

After we set up our tent, Penny got into her swimsuit. I sat on a log and looked at the trees and some people playing volleyball. They made me remember my first camping trip here, when Penny was doing her Vision Quest.

"I know I don't swim very well anymore, but I thought I'd just get wet at the swimming area. Aren't you going to swim?" Penny asked.

"I don't feel good. I think I'll just watch."

Penny dog-paddled around for a few minutes, then joined me to soak up the sunshine. A year ago we would have been chatting about all kinds of things by now. Instead, very few words passed between us. Part of me blamed Penny for everything — getting Michael, my school grades going down, being kicked off the Search and Rescue team. The other part of me had not quite decided, but was seriously considering blaming her.

I agreed to do some boy watching. I'm not sure if Penny was doing it for my benefit, or what. She spotted several she thought would be perfect for me. I tried, but I just couldn't make myself feel interested in them. She was so busy pointing them out to me, she almost jumped when a tall blond guy about 14 sat down beside her.

"Do you live around here?" he asked.

"On the east side of town. We go to Washington School. This is my friend . . ." Penny started to say.

"Me and a friend are camping in the woods. You want to come see our camp? It's neat. We could eat some lunch or something."

"Okay!" Penny said. Then a shadow came across her face and she touched the amulet of faithfulness she was wearing. "Um . . . maybe I shouldn't. I'd like to, but . . . no . . . no thank you," she said.

"Maybe tonight?"

"Maybe," Penny said.

"See you!" he said and left.

I was closer to giggling than I had been in months. Penny sat there with her chin in her hands. She looked embarrassed.

"I won't tell anyone, whatever you do," I said. I knew it would be the perfect opportunity to frame her, but I couldn't do it.

That cured Penny of boy watching for a while. We walked around the lake and in the woods for the rest of the afternoon. She kept asking me if I wanted to do stuff — climb trees, run, swim -- and I always said no. None of it sounded like fun. We went back to the tent, ate dinner, and it started to get dark.

I was sleepy and wanted to go to bed. I could tell Penny was restless. "Penny, why don't you go on a walk or something. It's okay."

"I'm afraid. But I'll go crazy if I stay here." She put on her coat and disappeared into the darkness.

I didn't go right to sleep. I kept wondering what I'd do if Penny and Michael broke up. What if she finds that guy and gets pregnant? She could tell Michael it was his. I could tell him the truth. Would I want Michael then? I thought about it for a long time. I decided I wouldn't. He wasn't the same Michael I was in love with last year. Or was I just afraid he wouldn't want me?



I woke up. Sun was on the tent, but Penny was still fast asleep beside me in her sleeping bag. I imagined what she might have done last night as I watched shadows of leaves play on the tent. Why couldn't it have been me?

I finally got up, washed my face, and rolled up my sleeping bag. Penny still didn't wake up. I sat in the cool morning sunshine and ate breakfast. Finally she stirred.

"What time is it?"

"Ten. You must have been up late."

She buried her face in her hands. "Yeah."

"Want some breakfast?"

"I guess I had to test myself some more last night. I wanted to be faithful to Michael, and I was, but something in me wanted to come close . . ."

We had our bikes all packed by noon, wandered around a little more, then rode back to town. I was bored stiff. Penny agreed to poke around in stores

with me. In the herb store I stared at all the jars and wondered which herb Dulcy used to make that wonderful smoke. I bought us a late lunch at the snack bar, and we wandered around on the beach at the park waiting for sunset.

As the sun got low, Penny became excited. We went to the picnic area and watched the sun disappear. A few minutes later Michael came out. Penny was bouncing and laughing and crying, helping him to drink some water and kissing him at the same time. I smiled, but there was no excitement in me, and realizing that made me want to cry.



A few days before Lammas, I wandered to the Grove. Someone was there. I was scared at first, but I kept going. First I saw a little green tent set up on the side away from the fire pit. Then I saw Dulcy sitting in the Magic Circle doing something. I went closer. A twig snapped under my foot.

"You scared me!" she said, almost dropping the plate she held. "How are you, Ariel?"

"Okay. I was at the herb store, and I was wondering what that herb was you put on the coals at Beltane."

"You can't buy it at the store. I order it through the mail. It's called Thorn Apple or Jimson Weed."

"What're you doing?" I asked.

"Cleaning mushrooms. You want one?"

"Are they good to eat?"

"Yeah!" she said.

They were spindly little things. I nibbled at one. It was okay. I looked around at everything Dulcy was doing — herbs hanging to dry, several jars of herbs soaking in liquids, a big mortar and pestle for crushing, and several big books open. My head started feeling strange . . . light . . . floating . . . almost unreal. "Are these Magic Mushrooms?" I asked.

"Yeah. *Psilocybe cyanescens*. Do you like them?"

"I sure do!"

"They're expensive. Will you help me pay for them?"

"Sure. I've got some money saved."

We talked a little more, and I floated around, feeling as free as a bird.

Everything looked beautiful, and all the loneliness was gone.

The next day, I brought my tent and set it up. It would be nice to have a place to get away from my parents. Dulcy wasn't there. I looked in her tent, and found all her herb stuff neatly stacked inside. I noticed a paper bag that said FOR ARIEL on it. Inside was a little plastic bag with a dried mushroom in it. I smiled to myself and ate the mushroom.



Penny was the leader of the Grove now, and Michael was her assistant. No one ever said so, but I knew it as well as they did. I wondered to myself why I kept doing things with them. At least I could help carry the baskets of fruits and flowers. Part of it, I decided, was because I had started the Grove. Also, I could get wine and smoke and mushrooms by being in the Grove. But there was something else too — some kind of hope . . .

When we got to the Grove on Lammas, Dulcy had a surprise for us — a big brass incense thurible about a foot high that stood beside the altar. It was almost like a little barbecue. When we entered the Circle, she put a piece of charcoal in it, lit it with her candle, and it sputtered to life. She sprinkled in Frankincense and my favorite herb. I took a deep breath of the smoke when it came my way.

Issa gave the lesson. At prayer time, I noticed something. I didn't pray anymore. That made me a little sad, but I wasn't sure what to do about it. When the celebration ended, Penny had read the Tarot, Dulcy had made an herbal charm, and Michael had played. I hadn't done a thing, except drink wine and breathe Thorn Apple smoke.



Chapter 50

My first day of high school was one of the worst days of my life. I didn't like any of my classes or any of my teachers. I didn't have any friends. Michael was there, but I only saw him once during the day, and we couldn't think of much to say to each other.

At the end of school that day, I stared at my homework assignments. The thought of even trying to do them was more than I could handle. I threw all my books in my locker, slammed it shut, and ran all the way to the Grove. Dulcy had left me a mushroom, and I left her the \$20 bill I had promised.



I dragged myself along for a few weeks. Then one day I was told I had to go to the counselor's office. She was a big, ugly woman who started by informing me that she would be my counselor all through high school. She sat in a big wooden chair behind her desk, and I sat in a little plastic one in front. I felt like I was five years old again.

"So, Ariel, I see here that you aren't doing too well in your classes. Any of them."

I just stared at the floor. Tears were very close.

"Don't you want to succeed in school? You're a smart young lady. Your verbal I.Q. is 160, numeric 120. You could go to college, get a master's degree, maybe even a doctorate. What can we do to get you started?"

"Leave me alone."

"What?"

I looked at her. I felt the tears start to roll down my cheeks. She obviously didn't want me to cry, so I stopped. She said some other things, but I couldn't hear her. After a while she handed me a new class schedule and told me to go home early. I went to the Grove.



My new classes were all for dumb kids, and the other kids were either retarded or almost drop-outs. I fit in pretty well. The last little bit I cared about school disappeared.

It was almost Halloween, and Michael told me the Grove was planning to go to all the Haunted Houses, carve jack-o-lanterns, and then eat dinner at the Grove. I started to look forward to it. It sounded like fun, and there wasn't much of that left in my life, even though I was eating mushrooms all the time.

The day before Halloween my dad told me I had to stay home because of my bad school work. All day at school on Halloween I just stared at the walls. I felt trapped and every day I seemed to get more trapped. I tried to figure out why, I really did, but I couldn't break through the fog. The only thing I could figure out was that somehow it was very important for me to stay with the Grove. I didn't know why, I just had to.

For the first time in my life, I defied my parents. I went with the others to the Haunted Houses, then to the Grove. When I tried to carve a pumpkin, I discovered that my hands were shaking too much. But I was in a good mood, so I tended the fire and watched the others make jack-o-lanterns.



I was very glad when school ended for 2 weeks in December. I hadn't quite flunked out. In my new easy classes, I got one C, two D's, and one F. My parents hadn't said anything about Halloween, and they didn't say anything about my grades. But they looked very sad.

During Christmas vacation, I went to the Grove a lot to get away from people. Dulcy told me she couldn't get any more mushrooms until next spring. I soon finished the container of wine that Issa kept at the Grove. After that, I took to wandering around town, spending money on anything that looked interesting. I had spent almost \$200 on mushrooms, and I probably blew another \$150 to get me through vacation.

When school started again, I made a new friend. She was in one of my classes, but I think she was in some normal classes too. She slipped a wad of paper into my hand one day as we were going to lunch. I could feel something inside, but I waited until I was alone to open it up. The paper said FREE SAMPLES, and inside were several pills of different colors.



Chapter 51

“Ariel, your father and I know you’re going through some bad times. We’d like to understand and help you, but you haven’t told us anything about what’s bothering you . . .”

I wish I knew. “Can I have another pork chop?”

“... but we’ve decided that whatever it is you’re going through, and whatever you decide to do, we can’t let you hurt other people or creatures that we care about.”

What is she talking about?

“You’re 14 years old,” Dad said, “and that is close enough to being an adult that you have to be responsible, or take the consequences. You’ve hardly ridden Tara in a year, and I’ve been feeding her for the last five months.”

Oh, shit. I was starting to tingle and sweat.

Mom took over. “Your cousins live out in the country, they have a barn and lots of pasture, and they would love to have a horse to ride. Since you have given up your care and responsibility for Tara, we have told them they can have her. Tara is getting old, and I hope you’ll agree that it would be kinder to let her be with people who will spend time with her . . .”

I could feel my hands shaking, and tears were on my face. I don’t want to cry. Stop crying, Ariel! I can’t stop. My last friend is being taken away from me . . .

“... tomorrow.”

I hate them! I shared so many secrets with Tara, and all they want to do is

take her away from me. I have to do something! My feet were moving, and I pawed at the tears in my eyes so I could see. Through the backyard. I have to ride Tara!

“Ariel, come back here!”

Something scraped me as I burst into the corral, but I didn't even look at it. There was Tara. I stumbled through the mud and cried as I tried to open the gate to the dirt road. Damn it! There.

“Ariel, don't!”

I ran over to Tara and slid onto her back. She remembered me. She knew I was her friend. “Come on, girl. Let's ride,” I said as I nudged her with my feet. She headed for the open gate. Someone behind us was yelling. Tara got scared and broke into a run. My leg slammed against the gate post, but I didn't care, for we were free!

I just let Tara run down the dirt road as far as she wanted. The wind dried my tears and trees rushed by on both sides. I couldn't do much to stop her anyway, riding bareback with not even a lead rope. Several trails and roads branched off, but Tara passed them by, always heading north. I was glad. The best hiding places were north of there.

She started to get tired, and slowed to a trot. I leaned forward and held onto her neck. She slowed to a walk, heaving and snorting. “It's okay, Tara. You can rest now.” I looked behind us. “No one is following us.” Then I saw blood all over my left hand, and remembered the first gate.

I decided to ignore it and looked around. My memories of all the roads and trails were coming back. I started looking for one I knew that went northeast. It had been at least . . . two years? I couldn't remember. I spotted an old junk car and knew the trail must be nearby.

My heart was throbbing wildly. I could feel it now, and it almost felt like it was going to burst out of my mouth. I reached into my pocket and picked out a pill I knew would make me feel calm and mellow. It was hard to swallow it, my mouth was so dry, but I finally got it down.

Was that my trail? It was all grown over with little alders. They were bare now, but still thick. “Remember this trail, Tara? I know it looks a little weird, but I think it'll get better.” I turned her head toward the barely visible path as best I could. She hesitated. “Please, Tara?” She wouldn't do it. I started

crying. "Please . . ." I let the tears roll down my cheeks. My friend wouldn't go where we used to go together. I felt alone again, more alone than ever before.

I guess while I was crying Tara started walking again. When I finally wiped my eyes, we were somewhere else, still on the dirt road, but farther north. I started remembering people, people I hadn't thought about in a long time. My Teacher. And someone else in the class with me — a boy that liked me. Jason. I was eight years old then. He was nine, I think. He really liked me a lot. He was kind of goofy, but . . . he always wanted to touch me, and I'd never let him. Remembering that made my throat all tight and lumpy. I wish I was eight years old again. I'd let him touch me and even kiss me. I wouldn't be afraid anymore.

Michael. I was afraid, Michael. I was so afraid I didn't have a chance with you. I won't be afraid next time.

Tara had stopped. I looked — she was drinking at a little stream that crossed the road. I remembered my dry throat and slid off. Ouch! My right leg burst into screaming pain when I hit the ground. I leaned against Tara and tried not to let myself faint. Then I remembered the gate post when Tara started running. Ouch! I slowly sat down and inched myself over to a clear pool of water on the side of the road.

My leg seemed to be relaxing. I leaned over and took a long drink. A drop of water hung on my nose and tickled — it made me laugh a little, and I hadn't done that in a long time. I sat there in the mud for a few minutes. Why do I feel happy right now? Everything seemed so bad, and my knee was getting stiff. I'd probably have to crawl home if Tara walked away. But I had nothing to go home to, either. My whole life was right here — me, a horse, and a little stream of water. Why am I suddenly so happy?

After a little while I managed to climb back on Tara. I wrapped my arms around her neck and let her take me wherever she wanted.

"What am I going to do about school, Tara?" She didn't have an answer for me. Neither did the counselor. All she could do was put me in classes where I could get a couple of D's, instead of all F's. Some counselor. I wish I could see the future. I wish I had a future. Maybe Penny would read the Tarot for me. Maybe I don't want her to.

The sun glinted through the trees in front of me. That seemed a little strange, but I couldn't think of why. "Where should I go, Tara? No one understands me here. I wish I could just live in a little cabin in the woods, somewhere no one knows about. And you would be my only friend. We could ride and hunt every day. I understand about the trail. You're smarter than me sometimes. I love you, Tara."

I felt strange saying that, because I knew my dad was right. He had been feeding her for a long time. I wasn't very good at loving someone, even a horse. I never had been. Jason. Michael. Tara. I cried some more and buried my face in Tara's mane.

I think a long time passed. Tara stopped. I looked up, and there was the open gate to her corral. The sun was low. I looked at Tara. She was my friend, but she couldn't understand me either. I slid off, being careful not to land on my right leg, and led her in. Hobbling around the barn, I gave her hay and grain for the last time, and brushed her as best I could.

"I need people, don't I, old girl." I limped hack to the house, passed my parents in the family room who had obviously just been talking about me, and shut the door to my room very softly. I found the pill I wanted, curled up in bed, and tried to forget about boys and horses.



Chapter 52

“What do you do for fun?” Sandy asked.

I remembered someone I had seen at one of those swimming rescue demos years ago. Sandy wasn't quite the same as the girl I remembered, but she made me think the same thing — a Wood Sprite. It kind of surprised me, because I hadn't done much of anything for the Grove in a long time. I wanted to. I really wanted to.

“Magic,” I said. I hadn't said anything about the Grove.

“My mom speaks in tongues and stuff,” she said, brushing her long blond hair. “I'd like to do something like that, but not the same thing. Could I learn magic?”

“Maybe. Can you meet me at the park Saturday?”

Sandy wasn't in the dummy classes with me. We had met at lunch, and just seemed to get along right away. It made me feel good to have a normal friend. Well, she was kind of strange, and mostly a loner. But I liked her.

“Sure. See you tomorrow, Ariel.”



I told the others, and we all met on Saturday. I was amazed how much Dulcy was able to climb trees and stuff. Nothing like Penny yet, of course, but not bad.

After Sandy got there, we all sat around and everyone asked her questions. I could tell Penny liked her, and I think the others did too. We did some swinging in a maple, and Dulcy tried to make a fire.

"Now don't get excited, anybody. I'm new at this. They don't teach this in Girl Scouts, and besides, I was never a Girl Scout." She kept trying. We all watched, almost holding our breaths. Finally she got a spark to catch, and nursed it into a tiny flame, but a breeze came up and put it out.

"Want to try again?" Penny asked.

"No. I came close. I'll watch you guys some more."

Penny soon had a fire going, and Michael brought out a bag of marshmallows.

"Tell me about your magic," Sandy said.

Everyone looked at me. I wanted to crawl in a hole.

"Oh, well," Penny said. "Ariel has always chosen good people before. We do white magic . . ."

I could tell Penny was mad at me. While she was explaining the magic the Grove did, I went to the drinking fountain and took one of my favorite pills. When I got back, they were all talking and laughing together, asking and answering questions. I just sat and listened.



At Candlemas, we all talked about Sandy. It was a cold evening, so Michael and Issa built a big fire and we spent most of the time around it. I couldn't say much, other than I liked her and knew she would make a good Sprite. Dulcy taught us a circle folk dance, and Michael played while the rest of us danced around the outside of the Magic Circle, always going to the right as Dulcy taught us. We blessed a whole bunch of new candles. Penny, Michael, and Issa had made most of them at Michael's house. The wine tasted good, but there was never enough to make me feel good anymore.



My bank account was down to \$376. That made me a little sad, but I didn't really care, and I didn't know what to do about it. I just kept floating along, trying to feel good, and life seemed to be going by faster and faster. I knew my mom and dad were getting mail from the school. I knew my teachers were talking about me. Once I had to talk to another counselor or psychologist or something. But it all seemed to be rushing past me, faster and faster. Only . . . I didn't have any idea where I was going.

March went by and someone told me it was springtime. Some lady started

following me around school, but she never talked to me. I started to get sick just before Easter — colds and diarrhea and stuff. Tara was gone. Staring at the empty corral one day, I realized how bad I felt, and I started screaming and crying and it was a long time before my mom could get me to settle down and go to bed.

I was pretty sure I was dying.



Chapter 53

My mom didn't make me go to school after that. I didn't care. I was a wreck, and all I wanted to do was lie in bed and try to think of reasons why my life should go on. It was really hard to think of any.

One evening I was sitting on my bed, poking at my dinner on a tray. I didn't know what day it was. The doorbell rang, and a minute later, Penny and Michael and Sandy were in my room telling me I needed to get ready for Beltane. I didn't know what to say, so I just let Penny get out my cloak and Athame and stuff. She put a coat on me, and as we walked toward the front door, I saw Issa and Dulcy talking to my parents in the family room. My mom was crying. I didn't know why.

We all walked toward the park silently together. Penny was on one side of me and Issa on the other. I wasn't sure I wanted to go. Maybe it was time to quit pretending to be a Wood Sprite. I didn't do anything anymore. But I couldn't make myself decide.

We got to the park and I followed Penny into the woods. I was stumbling over almost everything, but for some reason they all stayed with me. I scratched myself crawling through the Guardian Hedge. Maybe it was guarding the Grove against people like me. Maybe I wasn't a Wood Sprite at all anymore. Maybe I should just go home and not pretend to do magic anymore.

"Go ahead, Ariel. You're almost through the Hedge," a soft voice said.

I turned my head. It was Issa, his hood back and his curly brown hair

shining in the dim light. That gave me the courage to go on, but I felt rotten.

The closer we got to the Grove, the worse I felt. As we started up the slope to the top, my legs started shaking. "I can't!" I said with tears in my eyes. "I can't go there anymore!"

"You're going, even if we have to carry you!" Penny said, her eyes flashing with anger at me. But then she put her arm around me tenderly. We walked slowly up into the cedars together.

Everyone sat down around the fire pit. I found a place beside Penny. They just sat there, their eyes closed. I felt really bored and I was shaking inside. It just went on and on. How long are they going to sit there like a bunch of dummies? I want to do something. Damn it! Why don't they do something? I can't stand it anymore!

Penny took my hand. Then she said, "Dulcy, would you kindle the new Beltane fire?"

"Sure," she said, and worked at the fire pit as Michael brought wood. Soon there was crackling, then flames. Penny left, and came back with a bunch of new tall candles. The fire got bigger and I could feel its heat. Penny handed me a candle.

The candle felt funny — my hands were getting all tingly and sweaty. It was a beautiful candle, about a foot and a half long. They must have gotten some taller wax containers. Everyone else lit their candles, so I did too, and we walked over to the Magic Circle.

"Ariel, please dedicate the Grove," Penny said from beside me.

Why did she ask me? What good would it do for me to dedicate the Grove? I didn't even remember how. I looked up at Penny. She seemed so much taller than me now. So much stronger. I wanted to. I wanted to do *something*. "We dedicate this Grove . . ." It's hard! I don't know what to say. ". . . to all Wood Sprites . . ." Why am I crying? Why can't I just dedicate the Grove? ". . . and all good Spirits."

Penny squeezed my hand. We all entered the Circle, set our candles on the altar, and sat down. I put mine on the altar last, and it almost fell over, but another candle stopped it. My candle was leaning on the other one. I burst out crying again and looked at Penny through my tears. She smiled at me. I think she was the only person in the world who ever smiled at me anymore. I

reached over and fixed my candle, then sat between Penny and Issa and made a half-hearted effort to put away my tears.

"The lesson tonight," Dulcy began, "is about herbs, and when it's right to use them and when it isn't. I have had to do a lot of thinking recently, because I helped to cause someone a lot of pain. So now, at last, I'm prepared, I hope, to tell you how herbs can be used for white magic."

I listened to Dulcy. I had never seen her so sad before. I didn't know she was capable of being sad. I could tell the lesson had something to do with me — I remembered the smoke and the mushrooms — but it was the sad look on her face that made me really feel something. I'm not sure what, but just knowing that someone else was sharing a little of the pain and the lost feelings gave me a little . . . hope or something.

". . . so as you can see, the same criteria about white magic apply to herbs and everything else. Let's ponder and pray about my failure."

Pray? It had been so long. I wanted to, but I didn't know how to start. Maybe if I just sit, the time will pass quickly and we can get on to other things. Come on, everybody. This is taking forever. Maybe it would go faster if I did it too. How do I begin? Maybe just . . . God?

Just as I thought about God, there was a flood of warmth inside me. I couldn't help myself — I started crying like a baby. Tears were pouring out of me like they hadn't in years. It was like a dam breaking. I felt arms around me, and heard Penny's voice whisper in my ear.

"Do it all you want, Ariel."

I couldn't stop. My whole body was sweating and my face was all wet and still I couldn't stop. I wasn't really thinking about anything, but I had the feeling like an hourglass was draining its sand as I cried, except that it was full of a year and a half of tears. They just kept coming and I couldn't stop them, and I didn't want to.

I felt hands holding mine, and more arms around me. The candles made pretty star-shaped patterns through my tears. My body felt weaker than I could ever remember. I started wiping away the tears. Penny was right next to me. Sandy was beside me too. Issa was holding my hands. I could see Dulcy too. And Michael, beside Penny.

"God, please hear our prayers!" Penny said. She was smiling, but there

were tears in her eyes too. I wondered why, but then I noticed Dulcy at the altar lighting a blue candle. There was a tiny vial sitting on the altar too.

"I made some big mistakes," Dulcy said, "but I still know my herbs. Good Spirits, please let this oil of sandalwood, carnation, and rosemary bring healing to Ariel, for all the hurt I have caused her."

Dulcy picked up the vial, turned towards me, and I could see that she had been crying too. She knelt in front of me with her head bowed, opened the little container, and said, "Ariel, this oil took me a month to make, and I was more careful than I have ever been with anything. Please take it . . . as a small gift of . . . of magic from me." She almost choked on her tears, but took my hands and let a drop of the special oil fall into each one.

I could smell it, and it was nice. Deep down inside, I was shaking. I had never seen Dulcy bow her head to anyone, but here she was in front of me. She capped the vial and handed it to me, then went back to her place in the Circle.

Before I knew what was happening, there was music. It was a song I had never heard before coming from Michael's recorder. Kind of happy and kind of sad. I closed my eyes and let it echo in my ears. I could feel tears rolling down my cheeks again. The boy was playing for me that I had been in love with. I wasn't his. He had a girl. But he was playing for me anyway.

The song ended. I looked up, and Michael was sitting right in front of me. He reached out and took my hands.

"When I saw how much you were hurt when Penny and I got together, I was really torn. I wanted you to be happy so badly, Ariel. I almost said good-bye to Penny a couple of times, but I stopped myself. I knew I couldn't make you happy unless I was happy. You probably think I never cared about you, but that's not true. I was in love with you once, Ariel, but it was a long time ago, when you first taught me how to swing on the high rings. You were the first girl I ever loved. I'll always remember that. But then time — and boundaries we couldn't cross — ruined it. I'm sorry that happened, I'm sorry I didn't tell you then, I'm sorry I couldn't find you again until years later, and I will *be* sorry for the rest of my life."

He kissed me. On the lips. I didn't quite know what to do. He had loved me once. I wanted to say something, but I couldn't. My throat was too tight.

I just let more tears roll down my cheeks as Michael squeezed my hands, then sat back down.

Issa went up to the altar and set two little boxes on it. He lowered his head all the way to the ground and stayed there for a moment. Then he lit another blue candle and began to speak. I couldn't understand the words — it was all in Hebrew. It was like a chant . . . or a prayer, maybe. I didn't know the words, but somehow I started to understand, in my heart, what he was saying. I started to feel warm inside. His strange words went on, low and throaty. My skin became tingly. It was a warm, comfortable kind of tingly. Almost hot. He got louder, and I started sweating. It was like sitting in a hot bath.

His prayer became quiet again, then it ended. I felt so warm inside, but also a little dizzy, and I was glad Penny was holding onto me. "Thank you," I whispered. He smiled and sat back down in his place.

Sandy said, "I don't know much about magic yet, as this is my first holiday with you guys, but I'd like to read something from the Bible that might be helpful." She pulled a little book from the inside of her cloak. She had a cloak on. And so did everyone else. But I hadn't made it. Hers was the first one I hadn't made. I wonder who made it?

I had a hard time paying attention to what Sandy read, but the last part lingered in my mind. "And he said unto her, Daughter, be of good comfort — thy faith hath made thee whole — go in peace."

Penny was at the altar now. Another blue candle. I could see she was peeling a clove of garlic, and had some other herbs, and a little blue amulet bag. "Spirit of Courage, please let this garlic, eucalyptus, and sage help Ariel to fight the temptations that have brought us all to this point. And as she once offered her life to seal an amulet for me . . ." Penny brought a knife I hadn't seen before out of a sheath on her belt, ". . . I now seal this healing amulet with my life, that my Athame shall take away my life if I do any less than everything I can to help Ariel come back to us."

No! Please don't, Penny! Her Athame was on the altar as she tied the amulet closed. No! She can't do that for me! I can't let her! I stumbled to my feet and ran as fast as I could, smashing into a cedar tree but still running. Down the hill. She can't offer her life to me! I won't let her. I'm not worth it! Ouch! I kept running and stumbling. I didn't know where I was going. It was

dark, and I hadn't run in the dark in a long time. Ouch! I fell. Get up, Ariel! Get away! They can't help you! Just run until you die! It doesn't matter anymore. There's the Hedge. The Guardian Hedge. No, I can't! I can't . . .

I started to fall, but someone caught me. I went limp and cried. I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't run anymore. I couldn't run away anymore.

"Ariel, it's me, Penny. Can you hear me?"

Penny. My best friend. Why? "Why do you want to risk your life for me?"

"Because you sealed my amulet with your life. And you almost really gave your life so I could have Michael. And you saved me from drowning once, too. I owe you my life and my happiness, and if I have to lose both to help you, I will. I have that right too, damn it, Ariel! You are my best friend, and I will *not* let you wither away as long as I can do *anything* to help you. I'm not going to let you die! I'm not going to let you out of my sight until you're strong and healthy again! And if you don't think so, I dare you to try and get away from me! I dare you! I can outrun you, out-swim you, out-climb you, and I'll use all the Wood Sprites and the whole Search and Rescue team to help you if I have to."

I was sitting in the dirt. I looked up at Penny. Her eyes seemed to be glowing. I felt so weak and tired . . . and little. She was right. I couldn't get away from her. Once I could have, but not now. And she was right about me saving her life. I knew the other Sprites were around us, but I could barely see them.

"I . . . I guess . . ." Tears took away my words. "I guess you're right. I can't fight you anymore. I don't want to. I don't want to . . ."

"Good!" Penny said. She took my hand and put something into it. A string . . . and an amulet. I smelled it — garlic, eucalyptus, and faintly, sage. My hands were shaking, but I put it over my head.

I looked up at Penny again, then threw my arms around her. We didn't say anything else, but walked slowly back to the Grove together, the glow of the fire guiding us. I felt hope, but I didn't really know why. I just had to trust Penny. I couldn't do anything else. She was my best friend again, or she always had been. And all the Sprites were my friends again, even . . . even Michael.

We stepped back into the Magic Circle. Issa handed the Grimoire to

Penny.

"We have written a special Pact," she said. "The top part is for all the rest of us to sign. The bottom part is for you to sign." She read it aloud, then handed it to me.

We Wood Sprites will do everything possible to help Ariel, our leader, come back to the Grove and become our Teacher again. One of us will be with her at all times until she is healed.

I, Ariel, will not try to get away from my Wood Sprite companion. I will quit using drugs, and I will do everything I need to do so I can become healthy and happy again.

I stared at the words for a long time. Then I closed my eyes. I could still see the words in my mind. I felt someone take the Grimoire from me. When I opened my eyes, Dulcy was getting ready to prick her finger. I closed my eyes again. I was still shaking inside a little.

"Ariel?"

I looked. There were five names written in blood on the top part, and the pen was sitting there, waiting for me. I started laughing. It was a strange sound that I hadn't heard coming out of my mouth in a long time, and there were tears running down my face again. I crawled up to the altar and looked at the pact.

"We're going to do the top part no matter what," Michael said, "but we hope you'll sign your part."

I looked at it again. Quit drugs. But I'd always have a Sprite with me. I'm not sure, but I think a smile crept onto my face. I picked up the pin and pricked my finger — too much. I grabbed the pen and filled it quickly. Sandy was beside me all of a sudden, took my left hand, and wrapped a cloth around my bleeding finger. She smiled at me.

I looked at the Pact, and with a shaking hand, wrote my name at the bottom. It looked terrible, like a little child had tried to write her name.

But all the Sprites were hugging and kissing me, and I knew I was smiling now. Dulcy appeared with a Band-aid for my finger, and after a while we all sat back down in the Circle.

"Ariel, it's Beltane," Penny said. "I think you'd be most qualified to ask a blessing for the seeds."

"Me? Are you sure? I . . ."

"Yes, you. I'm sure," she said, handing me a shoebox full of seed packets. I looked at them. There were many more than we used to have. I felt weak. I wanted to go to sleep. I wanted to take a . . .

My left hand throbbed, and I remembered the Pact I had just signed. No pills. I went up to the altar. Penny handed me a green candle.

"God, I don't feel worthy of doing this, but please, please help these seeds to grow for Penny's mom."

"And Dulcy!" Penny said.

"And Dulcy." I lit the green candle. "And please help . . . help the other plants in the gardens to grow too." It seemed like I should say something else, but I couldn't think of what. I felt really hungry. I sat there for a minute, just thinking about seeds and gardens.

"Ariel, you're crying on the seeds," Sandy said.

"Oh, yeah. I'm sorry." I tried to wipe the tears off the seed packets with the sleeve of my cloak. "I was just thinking that maybe I should grow a garden." I went back to my place beside Penny.

Issa went up to the altar, poured wine into the chalice, and said, "Lord of the Universe, let this blessing cup bring your children together, so they may know they are loved by you and each other."

He handed the full cup of wine to me first. I was scared, and the wine was almost spilling as I held it, so I took it with two hands. I looked into the cup of red liquid. This is where it all started, with wine. But . . . the wine isn't evil. None of the other Sprites get drunk or take drugs. It was . . . just me.

I put the cup to my lips, tasted the familiar sweet flavor, and remembered wanting to drink it all. The smell of sage came from my amulet. I looked over the rim of the cup at Issa. I was being tested. In my mind I could see my

signature in the Grimoire. I took a tiny sip, and with shaking hands, gave the cup to Dulcy.

I closed my eyes. I had passed a test, and I felt a spark of pride. Someone put some bread in my hand, and I munched on it. It was fresh and nutty tasting. A little while later, I felt a tap on my shoulder. Penny was handing me the chalice again.

"It's still half full. What should we do with it?"

I knew. I took the chalice, held it out in front of me, and poured it onto the ground. Everyone was smiling. Including me.

Penny blew out the little candles and handed each of us our tall white one. We filed out of the Magic Circle, and standing around the outside of it, Dulcy said, "Grove, thank you for your patience with us and our weaknesses. Thank you, God and Spirits, for being with us."

Michael built up the fire, and we all sat around it. Penny took my hand on the left, and Dulcy on the right. I noticed everyone was holding hands and just looking at each other. Sandy looked happy.

"I'll be with you for the first few days," Penny said to me, "starting tonight, and Dulcy and Sandy will help out too. Sometimes the boys will be with you during the day so me and Sandy can do homework and Dulcy can go to work and stuff. One of us will be with you all the time, even at night. Your parents already know."

"You guys are crazy . . . but you're wonderful!" I said.

"First we're going to get you free of drugs, and strong again. Don't worry about school. You have more important things to do."

"Yeah," was all I could say. School seemed so unimportant right now. I still felt like I wasn't worth all this trouble, but I knew I couldn't stop them.

The fire died down, and everyone buzzed around getting ready to go. Issa cleaned the altar and Dulcy put away the herbs. Finally Michael put out the fire, and we headed into the darkness.



I can't say I was happy or anything. I had surrendered to the will of my friends, and I felt a little hope. I still felt useless, sick, and depressed. We crawled through the Guardian Hedge. Penny would be spending the night with me, and that sounded like it would make my room a much nicer place to

be.

We came to the picnic area, and everyone else pulled off their cloaks, so I did too. All of a sudden everyone seemed to be running away from me, forgetting me. Dulcy headed toward her apartment, and Sandy walked with her. Penny and Michael started walking toward her house, hand in hand.

"Where's everybody going? I thought Penny was going to spend the night with me," I said, half to myself.

"She is, a little later," Issa said.

I hadn't realized he was still beside me. "Why did everybody leave so suddenly?"

"They knew I wanted to be with you awhile."

I was confused. I looked at Issa. He was so quiet, so gentle.

"Ariel, I don't have any practice at telling people things like this. I hope you'll understand. God willing, I'll only have to do it once."

"What is it Issa? Why are you crying?"

"Because . . . because I have loved you ever since I joined the Grove . . ." he said, wiping his eyes, "but I couldn't tell you . . . at first because you were too young and your parents wouldn't understand . . . and then, because I had to see if you could . . . if you could get clean."

Oh my God. I looked at the guy standing there telling me he loved me. I realized how much I liked him. I had never thought about it before. I had been so busy trying to forget about Michael. I looked at his brown eyes. I know I like him. He's 20 years old. But I feel like I'm 50. It doesn't matter. He's nice. He's strong. He loves me. I need to have someone love me. And . . . I want to love someone in return. I really want to.

I leaned against Issa and put my arms around him. He held me tightly. For a long time, neither of us said anything.

"I was wondering if you'd like to go get some pizza with me," he said.

I looked up at him. I could feel tears in my eyes again. "I'd like that very much, Issa."



Chapter 54

As Issa and I walked slowly to the nearest pizza parlor, I realized that I was crusty from all the sweat and tears, my hair was greasy and tangled, my clothes were dirty, and I was shaking and having fever chills. All that for my first date. The only improvement I could make, when we got there, was washing my face in the restroom.

But somehow it was more wonderful than I ever imagined a date with a boy could be. I wasn't scared. I knew him, and he knew me. There was nothing to hide. I was more full of hope than even at the Grove. And after that long meeting, the pizza tasted better than anything in a long time.

We didn't talk about serious things. Sometimes we didn't even talk. I was glad — I was so tired and shaky I wouldn't have known what to say.

We got to my house after midnight. I cried in my mom and dad's arms for a long time. Penny was already there, and had a camping cot made up in my room. My mom ran a hot bath and helped me get out of my smelly clothes. The last thing I remember was my dad carrying me, dripping wet, and putting me into my bed.



The next week was hell.

It seemed like I was either sweating or shivering all the time. My mom poured fruit juice down me and made me eat good meals, but I was still very weak. I took hot baths and slept a lot, but every time I woke up, Penny was there, doing her schoolwork or playing solitaire or something. When I was

awake was the bad part. I didn't know it at first, but I slowly realized how hard I was to be with. Yelling. Demanding. Criticizing. Crying. It's hard to remember it all. It's hard to want to.

After a few days, Penny started to go home in the afternoon for a couple of hours. While she was gone, Issa was there. We talked about little things, happy things, like flavors of ice cream and the classes he wanted to take at the college next year.

One day my parents made an appointment with a doctor. I didn't want to go. Penny gave me a dirty look. I went. He said all I could do was sleep and take aspirin and vitamins and all that stuff. When we got home and I looked at the vitamins my mom had bought, I started shaking and crying. They were pills. I couldn't take them. I just couldn't.

That evening when my dad got home, he handed me a big bottle of liquid vitamins. Penny got back from her house a few minutes later and gave me a bag of white willow bark from the herb store. Dulcy had bought it, and it would make a tea that would work just like aspirin. I hugged them both and laughed at myself.

After I started to get a little stronger, Penny took a day off and Dulcy stayed with me. We talked about herbs and things when I was awake. It was nice to be with Dulcy, and I didn't blame her for what I had gotten into, but she still blamed herself. Issa brought over fresh bread and pastries, like he did almost every day now, and I felt good enough to walk out into the backyard. He took my hand, and we strolled around for a few minutes. As we passed the gate to the empty corral, I looked at the grass that was starting to grow there and remembered the box of garden seeds.

I tried to write in my diary about Beltane. It was hard, because so much had happened. I asked each Sprite to help me remember everything that had been said and done. I wasn't able to get it all into words, but I knew it had been one of the most important days in my life, and I knew I'd never forget it.

After about three weeks, I was feeling a lot better. Issa and Michael would come over in the evening and the four of us would double-date in the living room with a board game and bowls of ice cream. My parents would peek in and smile sometimes. I knew they were proud of me. I was proud of myself, too.

One morning Penny asked me if I had any pills left. At first I couldn't remember — but eventually I thought of all the places I used to stash them. We came up with about 20, and had a ceremonial toilet flushing.



School was out now, and Penny and I were eating lunch in the backyard one day when a car drove up. I heard the doorbell ring. A chill came over me and my stomach got tight. I quietly crept inside through the back door. Penny crept along behind me. I was afraid, but I felt a surge of courage too. I'm not sure how I knew — the way the car stopped or intuition maybe — but I knew that something bad was here, something dangerous.

Mom and Dad were talking to someone in the living room. A woman. "... and her suspicious associations early this year combined with her absence from school last month ..." I couldn't hear it all. Penny and I snuck down the hall to the living room door. "... it seems that she has not had adequate supervision by you two, and so it may be necessary for the state ..."

I was getting mad. I stepped into the living room, and Penny was right beside me.

"Honey, this is Mrs. Walker, a social worker from ..."

"I know who she is. She followed me all over school for weeks, but wouldn't even talk to me. And now she's here to pretend she knows something about me so she can put a label on me and send me to some institution. Well, it won't work, because you don't know ANYTHING about me! You don't know who my REAL friends are, the ones who know me. You don't know anything AT ALL about my parents, and how much they've helped me! You have no idea all the drugs I took, or how easy they were to get at school. It took the people who know me and love me to get me out of it!"

The lady was standing now, holding her clipboard and frowning. I was seething. I walked farther into the room and looked right at her. "I almost DIED, and you knew it was happening, and the school counselor knew, and my teachers knew, but none of you would do ANYTHING. None of you would listen to me and try to understand. Only my friends knew, and they had the courage to help me!"

She was backing toward the front door now, hiding behind her clipboard. I was almost crying, but I was still angry. "I've gone through HELL getting

free of those drugs, and my friends and my parents have been with me every minute of the time. You have NO right to accuse anyone here of being a bad parent! You don't know how much my parents have helped me, and I'm certainly not going to tell you because I'm SURE you couldn't understand!"

The front door had been left open, and now she turned and dashed out as quickly as she could, clutching her clipboard to her chest. I was breathing so hard I was gasping for breath. Her car started and screeched away.

My knees started shaking and I felt faint. Penny caught me and settled me onto the floor. I was trying not to cry. I looked up at my mom and dad. Mom looked embarrassed, but Dad said, "I can see that I have a very strong daughter."



Chapter 55

A couple of weeks later, all the Sprites were sitting around in the backyard drinking lemonade with me. The weather had been hot, and we were talking about things to do for the summer.

"This is going to be the most fun summer I've ever had!" Sandy said. "I'm really glad you guys asked me to join. And I'm sure glad you're better, Ariel."

"You know," I said, "you guys don't have to stay with me forever. I'm through with drugs, I really am." But the truth was, I really loved them being around. It was sort of like having the sisters or brothers I never had, without the rivalry. I was starting to realize there was a part of me that was very lonely. As I thought about my life, which I did a lot now, I could see that the loneliness had been there for years. It had only hit me when Penny and Michael became lovers.

"What do you guys think? Should we switch to just pestering her during the day?" Penny asked the group.

"You don't pester me! It's just . . . you don't have to do so much for me anymore." I felt guilty, so I stared at the ground and pulled some grass.

Michael said, "You taught us so much, and you did so much for the Grove the first three years. We'll help you for as long as you need it. It doesn't matter how long. And the new people just have to trust us if they want to be Sprites."

I started quietly crying. Practically anything could make me cry since I quit drugs. I didn't really know why, but everything was so much safer in the

Grove than out in the real world. I wondered . . . was that part of our magic? I touched my healing amulet.

"Maybe another week," I said, "and then seeing one of you each day for a while?"

Everyone smiled at me. I felt warm and cozy inside.



Issa and I went on a walk almost every day, or sometimes we would ride somewhere on his motorcycle. When we were riding, the wind blowing my hair would remind me of my last ride on Tara. I held onto Issa and tried not to cry, but I usually did anyway.

I forgot about the loneliness when I was with Issa. We held hands a lot, but he didn't push me about anything. I was glad — everything in my life seemed to go slower now, and I was sure that if anyone moved too quickly, they would just leave me behind.

"Are you going to go back to school?" he asked as we were strolling one day in July.

I didn't answer for a while. School? I hadn't done too well last year. As I thought about my reasons, they seemed different now. Before I had gone to school and gotten good grades because that's what little girls are supposed to do. But now . . . I needed a different reason. "Do you think I should?"

"You'll have to decide. What do you want to do in the future?"

Future? It was almost a shock to realize that I might have one. I couldn't see it, but . . . unlike a few months ago, now I knew there would be one. "I guess I should get a job someday. It would help to finish high school, wouldn't it?"

"For most jobs."



I knew what I had to do. When I got home, I looked at the school calendar, and learned that I could register for fall classes any weekday during the summer. On Monday, I hopped out of bed early, ate breakfast with my dad, and was at school by 8:00. I strode into the counselor's office and stood in front of her desk.

"Ariel! What a surprise!"

"I'm over my drug problem, I want to come back to school, and I think I

need to take the ninth grade over again.”

She looked at me for a moment with disbelief in her eyes. “I . . . I think that would be wonderful.”



Chapter 56

It was late July. I still had a date to be with at least one of my friends every day, but Penny only spent the night once a week or so, or sometimes I would spend the night with her. Today I met Issa at the bakery at noon, and we went downtown and walked along the waterfront.

"I'm starved," I said. "What'll we get for lunch?"

"I brought some onion rolls," Issa said.

"Cream cheese and lox?" I suggested. He put his arm around me and we walked toward the deli. It was a breezy day — the saltwater smell was heavier than usual. I wasn't thinking about much, just feeling good and enjoying being alive and healthy again. Gulls wheeled in the air overhead.

"Ariel, what kind of relationship do you want us to have?"

I had never dealt with a question like that before. We entered the deli and managed to squeeze between people over to the fish cooler. "Slow, I think."

He asked for a nice chunk of raw smoked salmon and a quarter pound of cream cheese. I got some bottles of juice — I knew which kind he liked. He paid, and we found a little table.

"Exclusive and committed?" he asked.

I knew the answer. It was just scary to say it. It was important, like a magic spell or something. Dangerous if done carelessly. Wonderful if done at the right time, in the right way, and for the right purpose. I looked at Issa. "Nothing less."

He smiled. I poked a piece of salmon into his mouth. I think I love you

Issa.



Soon Lammas was upon us. I could really relate to Sandy — it was her first Lammas, her first day-time celebration at the Grove — and it felt like mine too. I hadn't really been there last year. The year before . . . I couldn't remember things too well that happened before I started drugs.

We gathered fruits, flowers, vegetables, and herbs out of six different gardens now. I carried baskets and helped pick flowers. Penny was the leader, and that was okay. Sandy and I smiled at each other a lot and sometimes we even broke out giggling.

The most fun part was putting on our cloaks and winding through the alder and maple woods with the baskets on our heads. The morning dew was dripping from the treetops. Michael played a happy tune. I could tell Sandy loved it.

We gathered at the fire pit, but after our silent time, Penny said, "I have kept the leadership of the Grove for more than a year now. It belongs to my dear friend Ariel. I can't keep it any longer."

Penny, you creep. Everyone was looking at me. Did I want to be the leader of the Grove? I started the Grove, but . . . Penny does a really good job. I owe her something. I looked at the ground. "I . . . don't think I'm strong enough for that . . ."

Issa looked at me. "Ariel has been tested more than any of us. She is different now, as we all know. She used to see deeper into spiritual matters than the rest of us — heck, deeper than my *rabbi* — and I think she will have even deeper insights to share with us as she gets stronger."

Feelings were fighting inside me, but a warm, fuzzy feeling was starting to win.

"Maybe . . ." Dulcy began thoughtfully, "... maybe Penny could be the leader, like the organizer, and Ariel could be the teacher, the priestess."

"Yeah!" Michael said. "Penny can plan things, and I can help her, but Ariel will be the spiritual leader!"

I couldn't deny that I had been through a lot. But did that make me a spiritual leader? A priestess? A Teacher?

Sandy was smiling at me and nodding her head.

"Perfect!" Issa said.

"Will you be the Priestess of our Grove?" Penny asked me.

I took a deep breath. Courage, Ariel. "I'll . . . try . . ." I really did feel happy about it. Maybe a little inadequate. I was glad Penny would still be the leader. A smile crept onto my face.

The Grove was dedicated, and Issa gave a lesson about the wisdom books in the Bible. Then there was prayer time. God, how can I be the spiritual leader of the Grove? What can I do?

Share your magic, Ariel. Share your faith.

My faith? I guess I had to have a lot of that to get through what I did. At least in one piece. Should I read a bunch of stuff about faith?

You can. But you don't need to. You experienced it.

Wow. Maybe I *can* be a spiritual leader. Maybe I *will* be able to teach something. Maybe I can help someone so they don't have to take drugs like I did. I opened my eyes and looked around. I wonder who I can teach? Everyone here already knows what I went through. At least they know what it did to me.

"God, please hear our prayers," Penny said.

I watched as Dulcy lit a yellow candle and asked the Spirit of Knowledge to help her understand an herb she was having trouble learning about. She put something on charcoal in the thurible, and it smelled nice, but I could tell it wasn't Thorn Apple, and I was glad. Michael went up to the altar next and asked a blessing for his new alto recorder. He said he was giving his old one to a younger friend.

When Michael finished, Issa started to move to the altar, but stopped and reached out his hand toward me. I felt a little scared, but I went.

We both knelt in front of the altar. Issa took two little boxes out of his cloak. I had seen them before, I was sure of it. I couldn't remember where, so I just listened.

"Ariel, I've already asked you if you wanted a committed relationship with me. You said yes. An old Jewish custom is for both the boy and the girl to keep halves of a broken coin, called a Mitzpah."

My heart was pounding. I had heard of the Mitzpah coin. It was almost like being engaged. I think I was shaking. I'm sure I was crying.

"In these boxes are the two halves of an Israeli one pound piece. I had them at Beltane when I said the prayer for you . . ."

I remember! They were on the altar!

". . . if you are willing, this one is for you to give to me," he said, handing me one box, "and this one is for me to give to you." I opened the little box. In it was half of a strange coin with Hebrew on it, and it was attached to a necklace chain.

"Are you willing, Ariel?"

I wiped my eyes and looked at the boy who loved me. Courage, Ariel. I briefly remembered Jason. "Yes, Issa."

Penny handed us each a pink candle. Issa lit his and said, "Spirits, please let this token of my love for Ariel always give her strength and comfort." He put it around my neck and clasped it. I felt it with my hand. It felt like it belonged there, next to my amulet of healing from Penny.

It was my turn. I was holding the box and the candle. Do I love you, Issa? I think I do. It's scary. I lit the candle. "Spirits, this is a token of my love for Issa. Please help him to remember me, wherever he is, and to forgive me for the dumb things I did." I was crying again. I put it around his neck, and with shaking fingers, clasped it. With a broken voice, I whispered, "I love you, Issa."

All of a sudden there was clapping all around us. I had forgotten about the others. I looked around and saw Penny, Michael, Dulcy, and Sandy all clapping and smiling. I was more embarrassed than I had ever been. I looked back at Issa. He leaned forward and kissed me. If I was dying of embarrassment before, I was dead and buried now. But I think I was smiling.

Michael played and we began the ceremony of the first fruits of the harvest. Later, around the fire while munching on fresh fruit and veggies, Issa made an announcement.

"I would like to do my Vision Quest in about a week. I want to be tested as much as God will allow so I can know and understand what Ariel already knows. I only pray that I can pass my tests as well as she has."



Chapter 57

We didn't go to the State Park this time, but we were all there when Issa came out of the woods at sunset after his Vision Quest. There was a strange look in his eyes as we met. I had never thought about it like this before, but when I saw that look, I said, "You know now. You know how lonely I felt for a year and a half."

He didn't say anything, but he held me for a long time, even before draining his water bottle.



As I got ready to go to school, I tried to think back to what it was like last year. It had been rotten. I didn't feel that way now. I wasn't on the road down anymore — I was on the way up, and to my surprise, it was harder. The scary part was trying to convince people I wasn't a druggie anymore. Twice during the first day, people tried to sell me things. Only one of my teachers was glad to see me. The others pretended, but I could tell.

By the end of school, I had a splitting headache. Issa met me at my house as we planned, and I brewed myself a strong cup of willow bark tea.

"Do you have any homework?" he asked after we had relaxed awhile.

"One subject. Why?"

"I brought mine too. We can work together, if you want."

"But, Issa . . . you've done so much for me already. You don't have to . . ."

"I'm doing it for me, too. You're wearing my Mitzpah. The girl who wears that needs to do everything she can to get a good education, to become strong

and wise.”

I swallowed hard. I saw what he was saying. He didn't want a druggie or a dropout for a girlfriend. I couldn't blame him. That really got me thinking about who I was — I wasn't just alone in the world. I never was, even though I thought I was while I was doing drugs and stuff. I was a part of a family, with my mom and dad. I was a part of the Grove, its leader before, its Priestess now. And . . . I was a part of something with Issa.

He helped me with my homework almost every day, and Penny and Michael came over sometimes to join us. Soon I was looking forward to homework time as the most fun part of the day. But I realized something that bothered me. Penny and I hardly ever found time to do things together anymore. I guess it was partly because we both had boyfriends. And also, we both had more homework than in past years. But I was sure glad she was still my friend, and our friendship seemed to get better as I got stronger and more confident about things.

With Issa's help, I did well in school. September passed and October neared its end.



“I know we're Sprites and Halloween is important to us, but we have to grow up sometime!” Sandy said.

“But trick-or-treating is so special,” Penny said.

We were all sitting around in Michael's backyard. I hadn't said anything yet, and Penny seemed all alone in her crusade to keep trick-or-treating alive. I wanted to come to her rescue, but I just wasn't sure.

“But aren't people going to get suspicious of all these teenagers — and adults even — all in blue cloaks, running around trick-or-treating?” Dulcy asked.

I saw something happening to Penny, but I could hardly believe it at first. I had forgotten that other people could cry too. Issa was saying something about feeling too old.

“Wait!” I said. Everyone looked at me. I wanted to help Penny, but I kind of agreed with the others. There has to be a way. “Sprites . . . should always be children at heart.” I let the thought linger a moment.

Everyone slowly nodded.

"But we have to be careful too. We have to navigate a path between the thorns of the world, just like we do every time we pass through the Guardian Hedge. How about . . . we go to a Haunted House, have dinner and ceremonies at the Grove, and then go trick-or-treating on the way home at a few houses that still have their porch lights on? It'll be dark, and we can lurk through the shadows like Wood Sprites are supposed to!"

"And after that, you are all invited to a little party at my house, which goes as late as we want," Issa said.

Penny relaxed. "That sounds nice."

Everyone agreed. I could tell Penny was feeling better, and she started making notes of all the different magic people wanted to do. She also mentioned that she would be putting her tent there with mine and Dulcy's. I began to think about the ingredients for the amulet I wanted to make.



We all met at the college after school, and I held onto Issa as we toured the torture chambers, dungeons, witches' dens, and graveyards the college students had put together.

We didn't just eat at the Grove, we feasted, beginning with hot spiced cider and ending with Halloween cookies. The hilltop hummed with magic, music, and dancing for hours, and I knew I had a friend for life when I slipped the amulet of reconciliation over Dulcy's head.

"You don't deserve the blame for anything I did. Only I can take that blame. But even so, you humbled yourself and learned from it. You will always be a Sprite, the Master Herbalist of the Grove, and my sister forever."

She looked at me and her eyes were smiling, like they used to, before I started eating mushrooms.

Michael played and Penny dedicated a new Grimoire. She handed me both the old one and the new one, and said, "These should be in the keeping of the Priestess."

I thought for a moment. "I'll keep them, but I'm rusty at calligraphy, so it gives you an excuse to come over more often!" Everyone laughed. Penny and I smiled at each other.

Dulcy gave a vial of anointing oil to Sandy, made just the way it used to be in the ancient Christian church. Issa led a group prayer, mostly in English,

but a little in Hebrew too. Michael did the blessing of the wine and cakes, and the remembering of the dead.

Outside the Circle, I said, "You are always patient with us, fair Grove. Thank you again. On this Halloween night, let all our hauntings be white!"

I surprised myself. I didn't know I had a poetic hair on my head. Maybe it was just an accident. But I really was starting to feel better about being the Priestess of the Grove.



We lurked our way through the darkness to a few houses. I was really out of practice at the physical skills a Sprite was supposed to have, like walking in the dark, but I managed to keep up. Several people were glad to get rid of their leftover candy. It was getting late, and we were on our way to Issa's house when I realized that the house we were passing looked strangely familiar — and strangely important.

"Penny, help me remember. That house. A long time ago."

"I think we went trick-or-treating there once. You, me, Michael, and a little girl we met."

"Yes! And the old guy knew our cloaks were Druidic Bard cloaks! Remember?"

"Vaguely."

I had to find out. I had to know who he was and how he knew. "Will you guys come with me?"

"Sure."

"Why not?"

I headed up the walkway to the little house. The porch light wasn't on, but there was a light inside. I looked behind me. My friends were all with me. I pulled back my hood, and the others did too. The doorbell chimed several times when I pushed the button. We waited.

I began to wonder if anyone was home. I rang again. Finally we heard a chain being unlatched, and the door opened a crack.

"It's too late for trick-or-treating," an old female voice snapped. I could hardly see her.

"Ma'am, we're not really trick-or-treating, we just wanted to say hello to the man we met here two or three years ago."

"Three," Penny said.

"You must mean my brother. He passed away last year," she crackled.

"Oh. I'm sorry. Well . . . thank you. Good night."

"Why do you remember my brother?" she hissed as we started to turn.

I turned back. "He seemed to know some things, about history and stuff, that no one else would have known. He knew what kind of cloaks these are. I just wanted to ask him how he knew."

"My brother was always reading some kind of history nonsense or other," she said, opening the door a little wider. "Why would kids like you care about that stuff?"

"We study history too," I said. I didn't want to say too much.

She opened the door even more. "Hmm. You look like smart kids. Do you get good grades?"

I wasn't sure why, but she seemed interested in us. "This is Issa. He's a baker and he goes to college."

"Hello, ma'am," Issa said.

"This is Penny, and Michael."

"Hello," they said.

"They are both good students," I said.

"And this is Dulcy."

"Hello, ma'am. I'm out of school and I work, but I still study things on my own."

"And this is Sandy. I'm Ariel." I couldn't honestly say much about our grades. I hoped she wouldn't notice the omission.

"Well, why don't you all come in. I want you to look at the shelf of books my brother left behind. And I bet you all would like a nice cup of hot cocoa."

"Thank you!" I said. She opened the door all the way and we filed in, following her slowly into a little dining room. In one corner was a built-in bookcase full of books, floor to ceiling.

"You kids look at those, and I'll fix hot cocoa." She lumbered into the little kitchen beyond, leaving us alone with the books.

"Ariel, look! The complete *Golden Bough*!" Penny said, looking at the books.

"Josephus and Pliny the Elder!" Michael said.

Issa went over to the shelves. "Here's an English translation of the *Zohar*," he said. "Half these books are on our reading list, and the other half should be!"

We were all looking at the shelves of books now, many of them very old. I saw several I had once requested at the library, and gotten strange looks from the librarian for doing so.

"At least a dozen different kinds of Bibles," Sandy said. I noticed mixed feelings in her tone of voice.

"And the *Kings* of Confucius, and the *Koran* and *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Tipitakas* of Buddhism," Dulcy mentioned.

"Wow! If we could just use these once in a while, it would be great!" Penny said.

"Come over here and drink your cocoa," the lady said, setting a tray down on the dining table. "Do you like Howard's books? They are all strange to me."

"We like them very much!" I said. "Would it ever be possible for us to borrow one or two of them at a time? We'd be *very* careful with them."

"Maybe," she said. "Write your name and address on the note pad by the telephone, and I'll see what I can do."

We drank our cocoa and looked at the titles some more. Hermes Trismagistus, Eliphas Levi, Lady Sheba. History, philosophy, religion. She wouldn't say anything more about them. We finished our cocoa and thanked her as we left.

"What do you think?" Penny said as we headed down the street toward Issa's house.

"I have a hunch we'll be seeing those books again."



Chapter 58

Winter struck with fury that year, and a huge windstorm took out the power lines for almost a week. Lots of boats were torn from their moorings, and a whole section of floating dock was swept away. After the storm, Penny was out with the Search and Rescue team helping to secure things.

I went with Issa to the synagogue once a month, which was as often as they met, and he went with me to Mass the rest of the time. At Candlemas, Issa had a surprise for us — brass medallions, with the image of a cedar tree in the middle, the symbols for Earth, Air, Fire, and Water around it, and a word in Hebrew underneath the tree, a different word on each one. He had made them in his college jewelry class, and he would only tell us what one of the words meant, the one he gave to Michael — in Hebrew, *Hesed*, which meant Love. Michael blushed. The rest of us would have to wait.



Spring came as suddenly in March as winter had in November. I found myself out behind the backyard a lot, looking at the old corral. I remembered Tara, but I was thinking of something else now. As the grass began to grow, I started thinking of other growing things — vegetables and flowers, and herbs too. That piece of ground was calling to me. I knew it was poor soil right now, and it would take a lot of work to make it fertile, but I wanted to try.

I knew from the beginning of my plans that it had to be a magical garden. I wanted to do everything carefully and with all the wisdom I had in me, or that I could learn from books or people. I started going out there after school

whenever it wasn't raining — I talked to the grass and the soil, and I sat on the ground and read books on gardening. But I always did my homework, even though I wasn't getting grades as high as I used to, before . . . the drugs.

By mid March I had scrounged up piles of leaves, buckets of chicken manure and sand, sacks of lime, and boxes of sawdust. I started looking for seeds. I only had about \$200 left in the bank, but the \$28 I spent on seeds somehow seemed more important than the hundreds that had gone for mushrooms and pills. Sometimes when I was alone in the garden, I would remember that part of my life, and tears would roll down my cheeks. Issa had been there all that time. Important and fun things to do had been there all that time. I had just been too blind to see them.

With handfuls of limestone powder, I marked off where I wanted the beds to go — not straight and boring, but twisting and curving and magical. Issa and my dad worked with me all one Saturday to dig up the hard ground and mix in the leaves and stuff. It was hard work, my dad swinging the pick and Issa shoveling. As I worked the soil with my hands and a little spade, I realized how much I loved both of them.

In April, I invited all the Sprites to come over and plant seeds with me. On planting day, I went out to the garden as soon as I got home from school. Just as I opened the gate, an idea hit me. It came from reading about the Vision Quest years ago. The American Indians were much more in touch with the Earth than we are today — they went barefoot, or wore moccasins when they needed to. I looked down at my velcro-strapped plastic tennis shoes. I don't need you in my garden! I pulled them off, and my socks too. The earth felt cool and moist under my feet. Walking around the beds, I learned things about my garden I didn't know, like where the soil was most sandy, and where there were still a few old dried thorns. Ouch!

When the Sprites started arriving, they saw my shoes beside the gate, and took theirs off too.

"It's the perfect time," Dulcy said. "The new moon is tomorrow. By the time things start sprouting, the full moon will be shining down on them."

"Do you think that really works?" I asked.

"Think about it. If the moon can pull the ocean tides up and down, don't you think it would have an effect on living things, which are mostly water?"

I smiled. "Wow. I never realized that. Thanks, Dulcy."

After walking around awhile, people started asking for things to plant. I gave each one a seed packet, showed them where to plant, how deep, and how far apart.

"Ariel?" Penny said, working on her third seed packet. "I want to help you in your garden all you want. Except for the vervain, I can never grow magical stuff in my mom's garden."

"Sure, Penny. You're still my best friend!"

Dulcy said, "Can I help too? I grow a few things in pots at my apartment, but I can't do much."

"No Thorn Apple!" I said with a grin.

"Absolutely not!" she said with just as big a grin.

We labeled all the beds as we went. The garden was going to be about half vegetables and fruits, one quarter flowers, and one quarter herbs, which would be enough space for every herb we could ever want to grow. Most of the herbs we planted that day were kinds my mom could use in the kitchen. But some were strictly magical.



I tended my garden every day, and often there was another Sprite or two out with me. We always left our shoes at the gate. It rained hard a few days after planting, and I was afraid everything would wash away, but when I went out the next morning to look, I found that the soil had soaked up the rain perfectly. Little green things started peeking out about a week later, and kept appearing for the next few weeks. I was excited. At first it was impossible to tell our plants from weeds and grass and stuff. But as they got bigger, we could tell the difference. I left a few of the weeds. I was curious to see what they would become.

At Beltane, we built a huge fire, blessed the seeds and gardens, and Issa gave Penny a medallion with the Hebrew word *Tifereth* on it, which meant Beauty.



Chapter 59

The park was rich in its new light-green spring growth. I had been lost in thought for several minutes. Penny was quiet too, tossing a stick now and then just for fun. Some people jogged by, and a girl was doing the rings.

"Maybe it's time I learned to do the things a Sprite is supposed to be able to do," I said. "Dulcy's going to do her tests soon."

Penny didn't say anything for a while. Then she said, "When Dulcy first joined, I didn't think she'd *ever* be able to do the tests. I was wrong. But Sandy . . ."

"What about her?"

"I don't really know," Penny said. "Somehow . . . she isn't happy. She hasn't been trying to learn any of the physical stuff, and . . . well, I'm not sure she's happy with the magic either."

I felt defensive. I had found Sandy. I sort of knew that Penny was right, but I didn't want to think about it. Not everybody has to be great at everything. I'm probably the weakest one right now, at least physically.

"I think I should start training again," I said, trying to change the subject.

"Can I join you?" Penny asked.

I gave her a funny look.

"Remember me and the water? I figure it's time I put that mess behind me, just like you're doing with drugs."

"You really want to do it with me? I'll probably be pretty slow and miserable at first."

"Sure. Anyway, it's phase three of our plan. Issa did most of phase two, getting you back in school."

I felt hurt. She doesn't really care. "I'll do it alone if you only want to do it because it's part of some plan!" I snapped. I felt hot and angry, but I felt terrible as soon as I said it, because I knew it wasn't really true.

"Do it alone if you want, but just remember that we cared enough to *make* a plan, and that I wanted to learn to swim again *last* year, but I waited for you."

I started crying.

Penny had her hands in her back pockets. "And remember that when I needed you," she went on, "when I thought I was pregnant last year, you weren't there. You were spaced out on a bunch of pills."

"I'm sorry," I said through my tears. "Damn it, I hate that part of my life. You've always been there for me. I'm sorry, Penny. Please believe me."

"I do believe you, Ariel. Just don't say I'm doing something just because of some plan. I *made* the plan, with the other Sprites' help. I slept in your room all those nights you were sweating and puking. Your school didn't have a plan, other than to throw you in with the dummies. That social worker didn't have a plan, other than to haul you away like so much trash. Even your parents didn't know what to do. The whole *real world* was ready to throw you away, Ariel. They couldn't . . . or wouldn't . . . do the right thing. Luckily for you, Wood Sprites aren't part of that *real world*."

With tears in my eyes, I managed to say, "You're the best friend in the world, Penny."

"Shall we start with a little jogging? Just as far as you want."

Tears still on my face, I suddenly smiled. "Okay!"

For the first time in more than two years, I was jogging. I didn't get far. My sides started aching and my legs cramping. I slowed to a walk, exhausted. "How far . . . did we go?"

"About half a mile."

"I used to be able to go five or six miles!"

"I remember."



We started training together almost every day. It brought back memories

of our original tests, when we were just teenyboppers. It had been so easy then — we were slender and all muscle. Now Penny weighed 100 pounds and I was almost 110. I had been a lot lighter and stronger when I rescued little Ben from the tree. I probably couldn't do it now. I longed for those days again — life seemed so much simpler. I didn't even worry about boyfriends then.

Maybe I should have, at least a little bit.

Anyway, I didn't know how to go back in time, but I did want to get strong again. We alternated between outdoor stuff and going to the pool. In the water, I had a very different problem than Penny. I had to gain my endurance back, and polish my rhythm. She was dealing with sheer terror.

But we both made progress. My one lap turned into three as Penny worked at the shallow end just to dip her head underwater. Back on dry land, I reached a mile jogging, but almost fell out of the easiest maple that had ever grown. Penny helped me down.

It was about the most humbling experience of my life, next to quitting drugs, to watch Dulcy do her first tests. She had worked for two years to get ready, sometimes alone, sometimes with Penny and others. I hadn't been able to help her much.

She climbed more like an inchworm than a spider, but I didn't laugh. I would have once, at least silently. Not now. I felt fairly sure I would gain most of my skills back, but right now . . . she was better than me. We all enjoyed the swing, and then Dulcy slowly climbed back up the rope.

The alder was particularly hard for her. At least half of her 120 pounds seemed to stick straight out from the tree. She climbed up about 25 feet and we all cheered.

After Dulcy plodded two miles, we ate lunch, and she kindled a fire for smores. I'd never be too old for smores, I decided.

Out at the swimming inlet, as Dulcy worked her way out to the channel buoy and back, Penny just stared at the water. As we were leaving, Penny whispered to me, "I need to come out here soon."

Dulcy had never been super-quiet in the woods, but she completed her wild-area run without stopping. We encircled her with hugs and kisses. Then everyone looked at me. For a moment I was confused, but then I remembered

what to do.

"Dulcy, you have completed your tests for mastery of Earth, Air, Fire, and Water. You are a Wood Sprite and our sister forever!"



The dark green leaves of summer were everywhere. I was working my running up to two miles, and starting to feel the friction and sluggishness slowly melt away. Penny and Michael and I were running one morning. We came up to the one-mile point, and all of a sudden a black-haired girl about 11 jumped out of the trees beside the road and ran up to us.

"Can I run with you?"

Penny looked at me. I couldn't think of any reason why not. And I couldn't spare the breath for more than one syllable. "Sure."

"I think I know you," she said as she started jogging. "Years ago. I think you taught me to swim."

I searched my memory. Yes, but when? I couldn't remember. It was so hard to think beyond the fog that had only ended a year before.

"Do you remember me?"

"I think so . . ." I gasped.

"I'm Rachel."

A smile formed on my face. I was remembering. "At the State Park!"

"Yeah."

We were coming up to the end of the second mile. I slowed to a walk, and the others did with me. "When you were . . . busy doing something here, Penny! I met Rachel at the State Park and taught her to swim!"

"Hi, Rachel. I'm Penny."

"I'm Michael."

"I can swim really good now," she said. "I bet you're super-expert by now."

"No. I did drugs for a year. That messed up a lot of things in my life, including my swimming. I'm just getting my strength back now." I was almost surprised that I felt comfortable telling Rachel about it.

"That's okay. I'll help you if you want. And you can tell me about drugs so I don't do anything like that."

"Penny was an even better swimmer than me," I said. "She was always being challenged by high school and college swimmers, and she always won."

“Neat!” Rachel said, smiling at Penny.

“But then I had an accident. I swam four miles, and then on the fifth, I almost drowned. Ariel saved me. I’m afraid of the water now. She’s helping me get over it, and I’m helping her run and stuff.”

“Why don’t we go attack some alder trees?” Michael suggested.

“Want to climb trees with us, Rachel?” I asked.

“Sure!”

It soon became obvious to us that Rachel knew, or could quickly learn, all the physical skills of a Sprite. We found out that she loved to read fantasy books, and that she was an altar server at church. All of the Sprites met in my garden a few days later, in a little clearing in the middle near the magical herbs, and we planned a day when we could all be with Rachel. Everyone agreed that she sounded promising, especially after hearing how easily Penny and I had opened up to her.

By Lammas we were all convinced, and we agreed to ask Rachel to join the Grove. Surrounded by baskets of vegetables, fruits, herbs, and flowers from my garden and others, Issa gave Dulcy a medallion with the Hebrew word *Hokmah*, which meant wisdom.



Chapter 60

Penny was in high school now, along with me, Sandy, and Michael. He was a senior, but because of doing the 9th grade twice, I still had three years to go. I would miss Michael when he graduated. He was still the first boy I had ever loved. For a while I had hated him too. But he had stuck with me, and I couldn't think of him as any less than a dear friend.

Penny flew up to me in the hallway after lunch.

"Ariel!"

"Hi, Penny! Want to pick herbs and things with me today?"

"Sure. Want to go to the Search and Rescue meeting with me Saturday?"

I had to swallow. "Um . . . I haven't been to Search and Rescue in years."

"Isn't it about time?" she asked.

My memories of Search and Rescue were good ones . . . as much as I could remember. That was before the fog, the drugs. In some ways it was almost like another lifetime, or a different person. I was a kid then, strong and fast and fearless. Now . . . I was getting strong again, but I couldn't find the speed and courage so easily. And Penny was learning to swim again, but it looked like her near-world-record speeds were history.

"Are you going to rejoin C team?" I asked.

"Yeah. And I'd really like it if you'd at least come back to B team. You're good. You're strong again. On a couple of rescues, I've really felt lost without you. I brought it up at the last meeting, and we voted unanimously to invite you back. And we agreed you'd only be a trial member for a few months,

instead of a year. *Please.*”

It would be neat to see Jack and Mabel again, and Carl and his dare-devil driving. I could feel the corners of my mouth start to curl upward. “Okay.”

“Great! I’ll arrange a ride. It’ll sure be fun having you there on rescues.”

I thought about Search and Rescue for the rest of the day, and as I padded around barefoot in my garden after school, I started remembering the rescues I had helped with. The tree. The helicopter. The lady in the mud. It was coming back to me. It felt like . . . sort of a bridge was being built, from those wonderful days when I was younger, to the present. It was exciting. I didn’t like not remembering those earlier days. And I didn’t like the memory of those damn pills sliding down my throat.

Penny arrived, pulled off her shoes, and we harvested things until the sun set and the sky turned pink.



Well, I did it. I was back on the support team, even though Mabel wasn’t running it anymore. I got a Search and Rescue pack, and as we practiced first aid, CPR, and transport techniques, I found that I hadn’t forgotten everything. There were a few faces missing from the team, and a few new ones. I told them what had happened to me. I wanted them to know. I was sure they’d find out anyway.



As Halloween approached, Rachel spent a lot of time with us, running or swimming, in the garden, even doing homework together. She was in the fifth grade, exactly where I was when I started the Grove. That brought back more memories.

“So when we first met at the State Park, you had just done your Vision Quest, and that’s the passage to the third level of being a Sprite?”

“Yes. The Vision Quest tests your strength inside, being alone with yourself, just as the elements tests prove your physical strength. Both are necessary to becoming strong and wise.”

“But I remember Issa saying you’re at the fourth level. How do you get there?”

I didn’t answer right away. How could I tell her without scaring her? But she asked. I have no right to withhold what I know. “The way to the fourth

level is personal, different for everyone. It is the real crucible. We all have limits, weaknesses, and the things we do . . . tend to let us find those limits. The other tests are just games in comparison.”

“I bet it will be something I can’t imagine . . . something I’ll never dream of before it actually happens.”

I looked at my young friend with respect and wonder. I knew the years would bring her wisdom far beyond mine. That same night I began her Wood Sprite cloak, and more memories opened themselves to me. As I worked, I decided to reread our study book, and maybe some new stuff too. I had an eager student, and I could feel myself being called to be the best possible Teacher I could be.



On Halloween, the sun set suddenly, leaving stars burning in a black sky and a cold stillness everywhere. We sat long in the dark, and I could tell that Sandy was restless. Michael and Dulcy built a leaping fire, and I gave a lesson on Symbolic Alchemy, relating the steps for the production of gold with the steps in a person’s growth. I could not have given that lesson in years past. I would not have known what it meant.

Rachel listened intently to my presentation and the questions that followed, but remained silent. Issa gave Sandy a medallion with the Hebrew word *Binah* on it, Understanding. Michael and Issa did a Halloween story, complete with spooky recorder music, and Dulcy led the sharing of wine and cakes. That chalice was very important to me — several times a year now, I had chances to prove to myself and my friends that I needed no more than a little sip of wine.

We talked long around the fire, passing cookies and mugs of hot cider. Seven Sprites now. I remembered the days when there were just two or three of us. The group felt complete, but somehow I knew a change was coming. And somewhere, in the back of my mind, I had a vague memory that we had been warned.



Chapter 61

The first snow hit suddenly the day after Thanksgiving. My dad had a fire going in the fireplace, and Mom had just started heating leftover turkey and trimmings for dinner. I felt close to my parents. They had accepted that I was growing up, that I had been through Hell and come back. They had accepted Issa, and they knew I wouldn't be living at home too much longer. I think we were all savoring our last years together. I was really glad we had made the change to caring about each other as adults while I was still at home. I didn't know anyone else who had been able to do that, and I felt really lucky.

The phone rang and Mom answered. "Ariel, it's Penny. A rescue."

"Thanks, Mom. Hi, Penny."

"Girl Scouts lost on Rock Candy Mountain," her voice came through the telephone. "Blizzard conditions. Dress warm. I hear John now, so you have about one minute!"

"Gotcha."

I stood staring at the phone for a good 10 seconds. My mind just wasn't responding like it once did. I felt confused.

"What is it, Honey?" Dad said.

I looked up. "I don't know . . ."

"Are you going?"

I was dreading the thought of being in the snow. Looking for frozen Girl Scouts on Rock Candy Mountain sounded so hopeless. "I . . ." All of a sudden my vision became very dark and I grabbed the edge of the table to steady

myself, wondering if I was fainting. A moment later I saw something in my mind. A black-haired girl. Helping to dig a snow cave. Some other girls nearby, crying. It looked like . . . “Rachel!”

“Who?” my dad asked.

Within seconds, I was in my room, had my boots on and was grabbing sweaters and coats. I was just about to shoulder my Search and Rescue pack when I spotted something in one of my open drawers — the bag of traveling magic things I had put together years ago. I grabbed it, and at the same time heard a horn outside.

My mom shoved a package of cookies into my arms as I dashed out through the snowflakes and jumped into the big covered pick-up.

“Penny, it’s Rachel up there!”

We roared down the street toward town.

“I didn’t know Rachel was in Girl Scouts,” Penny said.

“She’s a little embarrassed about it, so doesn’t talk about it much. She’s an assistant leader now. They’re in a snow cave, on the east side.”

John had a funny look on his face, but eventually sighed. “We have to try something,” he said, pulling onto the highway. “It’ll be like looking for a needle in a haystack otherwise. Are you telepathic or something, Ariel?”

“No. Rachel is.” I told them everything I could see in the vision. John radioed Central Dispatch, and the leaders planned a gathering location based on what I had seen. I don’t think they would have trusted my vision, except that they didn’t know what else to do.

Snow was blowing on the highway, and very few cars were braving it. As we got closer to the hills, the wind got stronger. Penny and I got our coats on and laced up our boots. John headed up a little valley toward the end of the road. He knew the area, or we would have never made it. Visibility was near zero.

As soon as we got to the end of the road, Jack pulled me into his truck. “What do you know, Ariel?”

I told him what I had seen.

“Why should I trust your vision?”

“I can’t ask you to, Jack. All I know is that Rachel is my student, I have seen before how powerful a mind she has, and I didn’t make up what I saw.”

Jack looked me right in the eyes. "But they were planning to hike the trails. There *are* no trails on the east side of Rock Candy."

John had been listening from just outside the truck. "No, but there's an old road. It was closed ages ago because it was too steep and kept washing out. I've been on it myself. Looks just like a trail now."

"Are they on that road, Ariel?"

"I . . . honestly, I don't know."

Jack left to talk to other people. I was torn. Part of me wanted to go alone if the team didn't believe me. At the same time, I knew I couldn't do much to help all those girls without the team. I felt cold tears on my face.

The driver's door jerked open and Jack hopped back in. "We're going up the east side."

I threw my arms around him. "Thank you. They're up there. I know it!"

"Get ready. Walt is passing out snowshoes."

Ten of us prepared to hike, with three on Delta team staying behind. I think Penny and me would have been told to stay behind with Delta except for my vision. The strongest five people carried tents and sleeping bags. Even just my Search and Rescue pack felt heavy, but I knew I was going to carry it, no matter what.

It didn't take long to find the old road, and we were soon trudging uphill through the snow, bending over to keep as much of the wind and snow out of our faces as we could. The snow wasn't very deep yet, with the trees catching a lot, but I knew it would get deeper. You can't make a snow cave in a foot of snow.

We walked for a long time. It was impossible to see more than 20 feet in any direction. The snow built to about two feet deep, and I said a little prayer of thanks for the snowshoes. I heard Jack on his radio talking to D team. The old road switched back and headed up even more steeply. We stopped for a rest and dug into our emergency food.

Up, up, always up. Drifts over three feet now, easily. Jack stopped us. "If they're in a snow cave . . ."

"Not yet, Jack. It's deeper where they are," I said.

"Okay. Let's go a little higher," Jack said.

We plodded up the old road. Snow swirled all around us. There was no

sound of any kind but the wind itself. We had to yell into each other's ears when we wanted to say something. Up and up, and the snow got slowly deeper.

We must have walked for another half hour. The powder was four or five feet deep now. Jack looked at me. It looked deep enough. I nodded.

"Okay. Pairs. Five minutes out, five back. Call out. Don't get lost." Jack pointed a direction for each pair. Penny and I went ahead a hundred yards and then carefully downhill from the road.

"Rachel!" Penny called.

I looked for signs of a snow cave. We walked down and along the hillside, calling and looking. Five minutes passed and we had hardly gotten anywhere. We turned back. "Rachel!"

No one had found anything. We went a few hundred yards farther up the road and Jack told us to head out again.

Penny started down the hill.

"Wait, Penny!" She stopped and let me catch up. "This isn't working!" I said.

"Got any ideas?"

"We were led this far by magic. We need to accept that and put our trust in the Spirits." I looked around and spotted a protected place under a tree. "Come help me."

When we were under the tree, I took off my pack and dug out my little magic bag.

"I remember when you made that!" she said.

I took off my mittens and dug around in the little bag with freezing fingers, found a purple candle, matches, and some whole cloves. The snow held the little candle well enough. My hands were too cold to strike a match, so Penny did it. Not having a thurible and charcoal, I popped a clove in my mouth and gave one to Penny. It tasted hot and tangy.

"Help me, Penny. Hold my hands."

I closed my eyes and thought of Rachel. No, Ariel. That's not the way. I let my mind clear and relax. A blank void. Please, God and Spirits, show me what you want me to know. I can do nothing else by myself.

Slowly, very slowly, I began to see gray light. I felt overwhelming

weakness. Deep cold. Faint whimpering. Somewhere in the middle of the gray light, a small circle of bright light. Something was moving in the bright light. I strained to see, but it was hard. I felt so weak. I seemed to be moving closer to the light, trying to look out. A figure. A man. John.

"Where's John?" I yelled, jumping up and heading for the road. "John just walked by the snow cave!"

The other rescuers were already gathering. "Where's John?" I screamed, gasping for breath.

"Here I am," he said, coming down from above the road. "No luck either."

Penny joined us, carrying both our packs.

I tried to relax. "Thanks, Penny." I shouldered my pack. "John, you just walked right by the snow cave, about a minute ago!"

"I did?"

"Please, retrace your steps!"

Everyone looked at Jack. "We got nothin' else. Let's go!" he said.

John started up the slope, following his own tracks. Steeply uphill, between trees and stumps. Winding around on the hillside. "I searched this area pretty good, I thought," John said.

"It's not your fault," Penny said. "The fresh snow has smoothed everything over."

"And it's a little hole, just a few inches across, uphill from your path. And they're too weak to call out," I explained.

John continued to follow his tracks and everyone else searched the snow above. Several times I thought I saw something, but it was just a stick or a rock

"There!" someone yelled. We looked. Barely visible, a little hole in the side of a snow drift. We were up the slope in a moment, pawing at the snow. The opening got bigger. Yes! A snow cave, with several figures inside.

While others pulled the adult and 4 girls out of the snow cave, Jack and John looked up at the falling snow.

"Doesn't feel like it's gonna stop for hours, maybe longer . . ." John said. "And it'll be dark soon."

"No possibility of a chopper until . . . mid-day tomorrow," Jack estimated.

They were both silent for a long moment.

"Last Resort?" John wondered aloud.

After a long pause, Jack said, "Last Resort."

"Are they alive?" someone asked.

I knew Rachael was. I could feel her mind. One of the other girls made a whimpering sound.

"Okay!" Jack said. "All four ladies and John, tents and sleeping bags set up!"

I ran down to the road and threw off my pack. One of the guys dug with his arms to make a flat place. He had a tent up in no time. I ripped the sleeping bag he handed me from its sack, pulled off my boots and outer clothes, and crawled into the tent. I knew what was happening, but had never done it, never even seen it done. We had talked about it at a Search and Rescue meeting, years ago. It was called the Last Resort for a good reason.

Moments later, Jack brought the almost lifeless form of my black-haired friend into the tent, took off most of her clothes, and slid her into the sleeping bag with me. I wrapped my arms around her. Please, Rachel. You called to me and I came as soon as I could. You feel so cold.

The tent was closed and I heard a camp stove start to hiss. Rachel was soon shivering violently. That's it, Rachel, shiver all you want. You're getting warmer. It will hurt at first, but you'll be okay.

"I think she'll make it," I said to whoever was in the tent with me. Someone put pieces of candy bar into my mouth, and I gladly chewed them.

About an hour later, Rachel began to relax and breathe more easily. After a little while I let myself relax too, and realized how incredibly sleepy I was.



When I awoke, Rachel was sitting up, talking to Jack. She noticed me and gave me a big hug, sleeping bag and all. "Ariel. I owe you my life. And those other girls do too. Thank you!"

"Are you okay, Rachel?" I asked.

"I'm going to lose some toes, but I'm alive."

"Have some soup, Ariel," Jack said. "The snow just stopped a little while ago. Do you feel good enough to walk down?"

"Sure, but what about Rachel?"

"She'll be carried."

I sat up and drank two cups of chicken soup, then we broke down the tent, the last one still up. While we were doing that, I heard the bad news. The lady, and one of the girls, hadn't made it. I noticed Penny sitting in the snow with her head bowed and tears on her face. I went over and sat down beside her.

"She couldn't get warm, Ariel. We tried everything. She just couldn't get warm."



We had a special Search and Rescue meeting that evening. Any time someone died on a rescue, the Sheriff had to get statements from everyone. Also, we had to restock our packs with just about everything.



Chapter 62

Michael and Rachel and I spent lots of time with Penny after that. She was depressed. I tried to imagine what it would be like to have someone die in my arms, but I couldn't. It had been a real test for her. She insisted it was nothing like what I had been through, but I knew it bothered her deeply.



Shortly after New Years, a wonderful thing happened. I was doing homework with Issa. We heard a truck drive up, but I didn't think much about it because one of our neighbors was moving.

"Ariel?" my mom said, coming into my room. "Truck freight for you. Three big boxes."

"What are they?" I asked the guy at the front door.

"Books, it says here."

I signed and he wheeled them into the living room. Glued to one of the boxes was an envelope.

"Who are they from?" Issa asked, stroking my hair from behind.

I tore open the envelope and took out the paper inside. "It's from a lawyer. 'In fulfillment of the Last Will of Howard Levi Burns, the library, consisting of the books listed on Schedule A, shall be delivered . . .'" Issa! Remember the man who died and had all those neat books? It says here that according to his will, they should be given to a young person who knows their value. They have been given to us! This is so fantastic! We had a little library before. Now we have a really good one!"

If my parents had somehow managed to not know that I was interested in old religions and philosophies before, they knew now.

We put the books on shelves in my room. I had to move all my old dolls and plastic horses, and my dad got an extra bookcase out of the basement. It was a proud collection of mostly hardcover books, some even leather-bound. I read off the titles and Issa checked them off the list, then added it to our study guide.

That evening, all the Sprites came over and we sat around for hours looking at them, each person trying to decide which one to borrow first.

I noticed that Sandy didn't take a book home.



For the sixth time, we made candles during January and celebrated Candlemas on the eve of February second. Rachel was already leading part of the ceremony. Dulcy presented Issa with his medallion. It had the Hebrew word *Netsah* on it, Endurance.



Chapter 63

That springtime brought a special feeling for me. I took long walks on the beach, letting the wind blow my hair and the sun warm my face. I was almost finished with the 10th grade, one more way that the bad years in my life were behind me. I had been voted a permanent member of Search and Rescue again. But most special to me was Issa. I loved him. I was sure now. He wasn't my first love, but that didn't matter anymore. I had been in high school now long enough to know that very, very few people got their first loves.

Rachel was walking with me one day.

"What do you think of imitative magic, like Voodoo?" she asked me.

"What is its goal?" I asked.

"Sometimes to heal, sometimes to harm."

"What domain does it operate in?"

"Um . . . natural. No — psychological."

"That's right. There's no natural mechanism. Those qualities make it . . ."

"In my opinion?"

"In your opinion."

"Gray, at best. But even at its best, it seems like a trick, and I don't like tricks."

I smiled.



I first got wind that something was up when I wandered out to the Grove one day to get a book out of my tent. As I crawled through the Guardian Hedge, I thought sure I heard voices, but when I got to the Grove, no one was

there. I smiled to myself. Someone had been there. The fire pit had been cleaned out, more wood stacked under the tarp, and the cedar needles swept off all the tents. I realized that only Sprites could disappear that quickly and soundlessly. I felt a little annoyed, but decided that if they wanted to clean up the Grove without me, it must be for a good reason.

Several times during April I caught hints that secret meetings were taking place. I didn't say anything. It all felt good, like a surprise birthday party or something. Anyway, between school and planting my garden, I had plenty to keep me busy.



Beltane was fair and green. I didn't have to prepare a lesson, so I just gathered my late-season seeds, my cloak and Athame, our Grimoires, and a couple of other books. As I walked to Penny's house, I remembered long ago gathering rocks for the Magic Circle, carrying them one by one to the Grove. The memory made me smile.

From all directions, Sprites gathered at the park. Once in the trees, we slipped into our cloaks and Michael struck up a tune. Their smiles spoke of more than the fair weather. There were secrets afoot, I was sure. Michael played and we followed, prancing through the woods but hardly disturbing a leaf. Around to the eastern fenceline he led us, then west to the High Hill. Finally, as the sun sank low, we made our way through the Guardian Hedge and up to the Grove.

I couldn't help but grin. It was immaculate, with all the needles raked smooth, and wood already laid for a fire. The tarps were stretched tight, and a crumbling sitting log had been replaced with a new one. We gathered silently around the fire pit and waited for sunset.

I looked at each of my friends. They all looked ready to burst with secrets. Sandy smiled at me, but quickly looked away. The sunlight faded into the blue of evening, and Dulcy kindled the new fire as Rachel assisted her.

Penny and Michael brought out many candles and holders, and soon the Grove was ablaze with lights. I was sure that many of the candle holders were new. We each lit our own candle at the fire and stood around the Circle.

"Sacred Grove of white magic, we are grateful to be able to gather under your protecting boughs on Beltane to celebrate the spring and all growing

things," I said in dedication.

Rachel stepped into the Circle, saying, "I am Rachel, and I am not yet worthy of a medallion."

Sandy stepped in, saying, "I am Cassandra, and . . . and I wear the medallion of Understanding."

"I am Dulcy, and I wear the medallion of Wisdom."

This was completely new to me. But I liked it. They were my friends, and they were proud to be Wood Sprites. Issa and Michael entered the Circle, Endurance and Love.

"I am Penelope, and I wear the medallion of Beauty."

I was the only one outside the Circle now. I realized they had entered in reverse order from when they joined the Grove. There were six candles burning on the altar, and the only holder left was in the middle. I stepped in.

"I am Ariel, and I am the priestess," I said, kneeling at the altar and putting my candle in its place. I noticed that there were already coals in the thurible beside the altar. I looked at Dulcy and she handed me a small bag of herbs. I knew what I wanted them to be, and pouring them into my hand, I smiled. Frankincense, sandalwood, and rosemary. I opened the thurible and sprinkled them in, saying, "Spirits, please protect us from all evils . . . from any source . . . including our own stupid mistakes."

Several Sprites chuckled.

I took my place in the Circle and Michael gave the lesson. It was about evolution and renewal. He talked about the seasons and how new plants grew on the humus left by those dead and gone. He talked about the growth of civilization, and how all our inventors and geniuses stand on the shoulders of those who came before. I pondered the many, many people who had spoken to me in books, and how I couldn't have possibly started the Grove without their help. I thought of everything my parents had given me, and I remembered Howard Burns, the man who knew about our cloaks.

"Let's all pray silently now," Michael said.

God, I am so thankful for having eyes to see all the beautiful things in your universe, and to be the priestess of your Grove of Wood Sprites, but I'm still not sure I deserve to know your magical secrets.

Just then something tickled my hand. I didn't open my eyes. I knew what

it was. Tears were close. Thank you for your signs, God. Thank you for all my wonderful friends. The tickling stopped and I knew the butterfly had left.

"God and Spirits, please hear our prayers," Michael said.

Penny went to the altar and lit a green candle. Into the thurible she sprinkled poppy seeds and nutmeg, and the aroma was wonderful. "Spirits who guard fields and woods and gardens, please be with us, and know that we Sprites will do everything we can to help living things grow." She collected seed packets from several of us. "Please watch over these seeds, and the gardens they will grow in, and all other gardens. And please help everyone who eats your fruit to feel your magic and know your wisdom."

Michael started to play, and Penny hopped up and began a dance. We joined her, one by one, and she led us all around the Grove, dancing and clapping. Finally, she ran toward the fire, and in an ancient Beltane custom I had read about but never done, leapt over the flames. Each of us followed, whooping as we flew through the air.

Laughing and hugging each other, we returned to the Circle. Penny finished the ceremony by blessing little brass charms Issa had made, each one a different flower on a green cord. She gave one to each of us. They were not to keep, she explained, but to give to people we knew who worked with plants or animals.

I looked at my little charm. It looked like . . . an iris or a foxglove.

"I have been asked to do a special ceremony today," Rachel said, bringing me out of my thoughts. She was kneeling by the altar, and on it was something flat, covered by a purple cloth. "I entered the Circle with no medallion because I am new. But there is someone here who doesn't have a medallion, and yet deserves it more than any of us. Ariel, please join me at the altar."

I was embarrassed. I was thinking that maybe the priestess shouldn't wear one or something. I went up and knelt in front of Rachel, and even though I was taller than her, I felt small and weak. I think I was looking at the ground. "You probably deserve it more than me," I said.

"I'll earn mine, just like you did," she said.

I looked up. Her black hair shined in the candlelight. She was strong. I felt so honored to be her Teacher.

"Ariel, you started the Grove. You were its leader and now you are its Priestess." She reached into her cloak and pulled out a medallion. It was much brighter than those made of brass. I could only think of one metal that shined like that. "Even though I have no medallion, I have been chosen to present the greatest medallion."

Gold? I could hardly believe it because the medallions weighed at least an ounce, maybe two. I looked at Issa.

He slowly nodded, pride written all over his face.

It was so beautiful, but my mind was reeling trying to imagine how much it cost.

"I can't get my tongue around the little Hebrew word on it, but it means Majesty," Rachel said, "and even though we're going to swap around the other medallions every year, this one is just for our very wonderful Priestess." She slipped it over my head. I couldn't keep tears from rolling down my cheeks. Rachel smiled at me.

"Issa paid for most of it, but we all pitched in," Penny said.

Rachel leaned forward and whisper in my ear. "All but one."

I wiped at my tears and thanked each of my friends. Somehow, it didn't seem like I had thanked the right number of people.

"There's more," Rachel said. "It's time to celebrate an ancient link, so we don't forget who came before us."

Penny, Michael, Issa, and Dulcy stood up and began to walk around the Circle, chanting something in a language I couldn't understand or even recognize. It sounded kind of like Old English, but Germanic too. They had their hoods on. I noticed Rachel pick up the covered thing from the altar and stand in the center of the Circle. I continued to kneel by the altar, not knowing what else to do.

The chanting got faster, and it seemed like the candles burned brighter. I felt strange, like this was all familiar somehow. I felt happy but vulnerable, as if my life was in the hands of these friends, and I was a willing sacrifice.

Rachel let the purple cloth fall from the thing she held. It was a circlet of herbs and flowers. She held it up high with both hands, and as she did so, her cloak slid completely off. Her naked young body stood tall as the chanting continued, and she spoke three words loudly and clearly.

"Ariel . . . Drycraeft . . . Holtpreost!"

Then she lowered the circlet onto my head.

Just as the circlet touched my head, I felt a rush of warmth all through my body that I had never felt before, and couldn't explain. I stood up and reached forward. Rachel's hands met mine and we looked into each other's eyes. "Someday I shall place such a crown on your head," I said.

"We have been betrayed," she said.

"Yes. Let us share the wine and cakes while we can," I said.

Rachel slipped her cloak back on and everyone sat down. I knew danger was approaching. I filled the chalice and Michael brought out a little cake.

"Spirits, please bless this cup and this cake. Help me to always remain worthy of the great gifts I have been given today. And help me to know the right time to pass them on to others who are worthy." I could hear noise, down at the Guardian Hedge, cutting and breaking. "As we drink and eat, let us remember that our feet are swift and silent, and our eyes are keen." I handed the cup to Dulcy and the cake to Issa. I could hear more cutting and some talking.

As the Sprites passed the chalice and cake, I spoke softly. "In a moment, we will all be tested. You are Wood Sprites. I am your Priestess." The cup continued around. "When I sip the wine, you shall fly. Do not be seen by anyone. Do not come back here. Gather at Dulcy's apartment tomorrow afternoon."

The cake was handed to me. I ate a bite and set the rest on the altar. I could hear gruff voices.

"We're almost through. Damn it, cut those thorns. There! There's the hill!"

I was handed the chalice. "Take nothing that will slow you." The Sprites were all silent, alert as cats. They had all heard the sounds. Belts were tightened and hoods came up.

"Run up there. Catch the witches!" a voice said.

I put the chalice to my lips. In a moment, the others were all gone.

I knelt at the little wooden altar, lowered my head, and prayed harder than I had ever prayed before.



Chapter 64

“Up there. That’s where she said they do their evil!”

“I don’t see anything.”

“Give me that flashlight.”

“Go to hell. I want to see!”

“Its just a hill.”

“Where are they?”

“Maybe they’re invisible!”

“Shut up!”

“There’s nothing here.”

“No one’s been here in years! There’s not even a footprint. Damn it! That girl lied to us.”

“Keep looking.”

“Really, the place is untouched.”

“Shit. You’re right. This couldn’t be the place.”

I waited until they were long gone. Then I couldn’t hold back the tears any longer. I cried as I put out the fire and blew out the candles. I had a tiny sense of what a certain man had felt, long ago, in the Garden of Gethsemane. I collected our books and crept home.



Chapter 65

It was a gloomy group that gathered at Dulcy's apartment the next day. Hardly a word was spoken. Dulcy and Rachel were crying. Everyone eventually sat down in a circle, still not saying much.

"The Grove has been desecrated," I said.

No one said anything for a while.

"But when a tree has been pruned, even to the roots, it can sprout again," Issa said. "Are the roots of our tree still alive?"

I looked up. I knew he was trying to give us hope. "Yes," I said.

"Yes," Rachel said firmly.

"Yes," Dulcy said, wiping her eyes.

"Yes," Michael said.

There was a long pause. Finally Penny looked up. "Yes!"

They weren't smiling, but there was hope in their eyes.

"We need to clean up the Grove and say good-bye," I said.

Everyone went home to get packs, and then we met at the park. Michael had a small shovel and Issa a little rake. We noticed a Sheriff's car patrolling the picnic area, so we went in from the north. We walked slowly and silently. The Guardian Hedge looked the same as always on that side, but it didn't feel the same.

At the Grove, it appeared that no one had been there since I left the night before — candles still in their holders, chalice still on the altar. We began by packing all our things into backpacks. Michael and Penny filled in the fire pit

while Issa took down the tarps. Dulcy and I packed our tents, then Penny packed hers. Firewood and Magic Circle stones were scattered in the woods. Finally the whole area was raked.

Now it really did look like no one had ever been there. I never told the others what had happened the night before after they left. It just seemed like it should stay between me and . . . God.

We stood where the Magic Circle used to be and I thanked the Grove for the last time. Everyone was sad. Issa and Michael carried the altar between them and we walked slowly down the hill. I was at the end of the line, and just as we reached the Hedge, something on the forest floor caught my eye. I reached, and my hand came back with a brass medallion. I recognized the Hebrew word for Understanding. Someone will appreciate this someday, I told myself.

The Guardian Hedge was a real mess where it had been cut through.

"It'll take *years* to grow back," Penny said, trying to hold in more tears.

"Maybe not," Dulcy said. She brought out a pouch and sprinkled something onto the ground where the Hedge had been trampled. "Spirits of the Forest, please hear my prayer . . ."



Epilogue

That summer, Michael became a journeyman baker, and Issa and I were married. It was a happy time — all the remaining Sprites where there, our families, most of the Search and Rescue team, and one school teacher. We didn't know it until a few weeks later, but that school teacher was to become the next Wood Sprite, and she found us a new Sprite almost every year. She was the only person, in the so-called real world, who ever knew I was anything but a jock or a druggie. That's one way I knew I had become a true Teacher. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

After we were married, Issa and I rented a little apartment, but I was still going to have a garden at my mom and dad's house. We set up the altar in our apartment for a temporary Wood Sprite meeting place.

During that fall and winter, Issa and I opened our own bakery. It took a lot of work, but we had help from lots of wonderful people. Our first regular contract was to supply pies, cakes, and rolls to the restaurant where Dulcy worked.

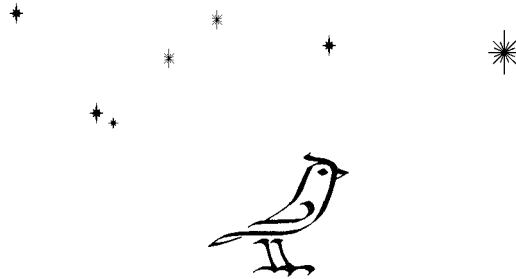
Penny got a part-time job with the Parks Department as a swimming instructor. All her students became well-informed about the dangers of getting too cocky in the water.

As a new summer began, ten years after our original Teacher taught me and Penny to be strong and to fly, Michael and Issa came back from a hike one day chatting and grinning. They had found a new Grove — a little farther away, completely secret, and on 160 acres of densely forested private land we

could lease. We got it ready during the month of July, although I was moving a little slower than usual.

On Lammas, we gathered in our new Grove. Penny brought her Tarot cards and the basket of vegetables. Michael had his recorder and a box of delicious pastries. Linda, with wide eyes and a very child-like grin, carried the basket of flowers. Issa brought the new bread and wine, and my big shoulder bag of supplies. That celebration of the first fruits of the harvest held special meaning for me, for in my arms I carried my firstborn child. With a special oil, Dulcy anointed my baby. At the end of the ceremony, Rachel received her medallion — *Geburah*, the Hebrew word for Power.





About the Author

Born in the Mojave Desert, J. Z. Colby now lives and writes deep in a forest of the Pacific Northwest.

He has studied many subjects, formally and informally, including psychology, philosophy, education, and performing arts, but remains a generalist. His primary profession as a mental health therapist, specializing with families and young adults, gives him many stories of personal growth.

All his life, he has been drawn toward a broad understanding of human nature, especially those physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual situations in which our capacity to function seems to reach its limits. He finds fascinating those few individuals who can transcend the limits of our common human nature and the dictates of our cultures.